The Video Game Archeologist Volume 2

14 Games From The Golden Age of Gaming

The Video Game Archeologist
Volume 2
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Introduction

Welcome to the second edition of The Video Game Archeologist. In this volume we take a look at fourteen games that contain an extremely rare gem for the 2600, one of the most violent games of the 16-Bit era, and one of the most ill-advised movie ports of all time.

So now that we are a couple of volumes in, I'd like to hear from you, the readers. What are you liking about this series? What would you like to see more off? Less of? Send me an emial at vgatv@yahoo.com and give me your thoughts.

And with that, I hope you enjoy the second edition of The Video Game Archeologist!

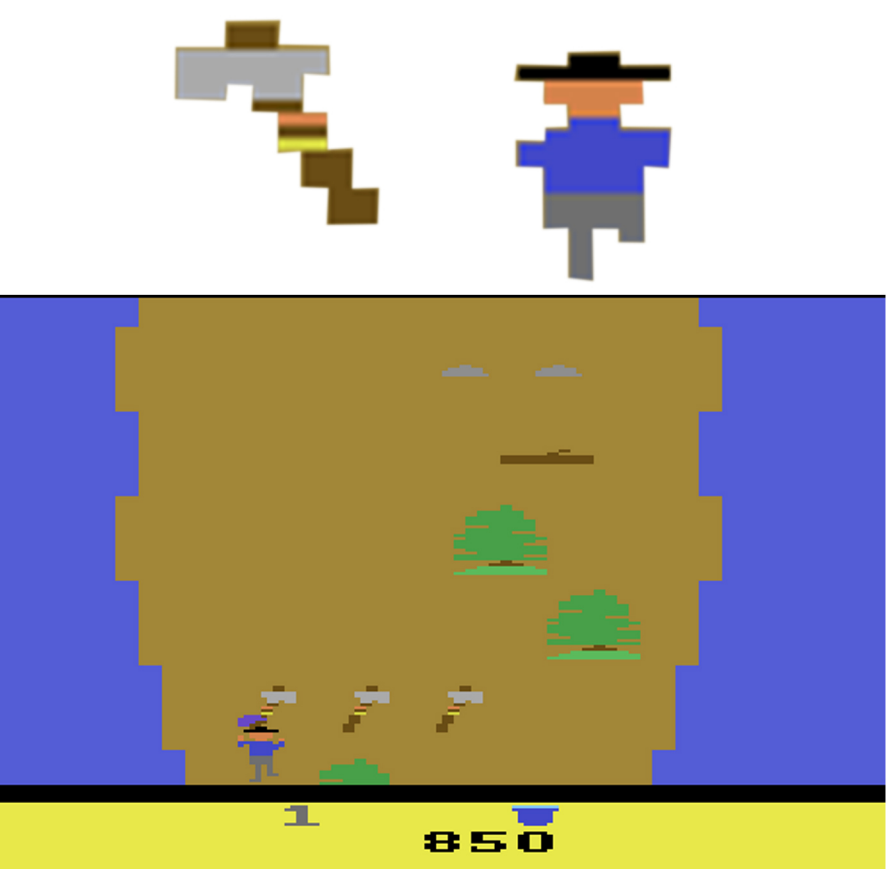
- Derek Slaton

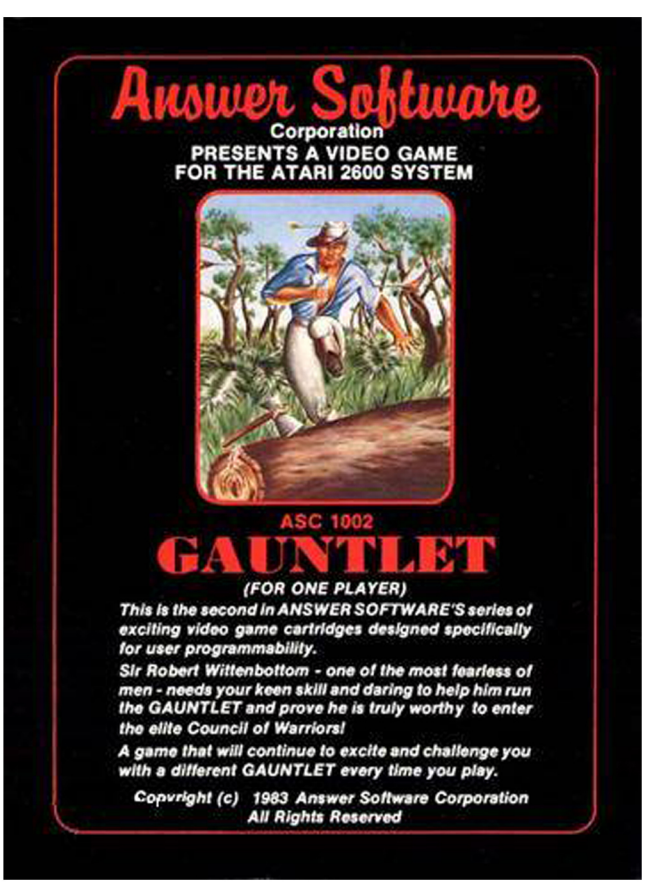
GAUNTLET

System: Atari 2600 Release Date: 1983

This has got to be one of the best setups for an Atari 2600 game. You are Sir Robert Wittenbottom, who after discovering an ancient civilization must run a dangerous gauntlet in order to prove himself worthy of becoming a warrior in their tribe. The only thing better than the setup is the thought of what the tribe would do to him if he fails.

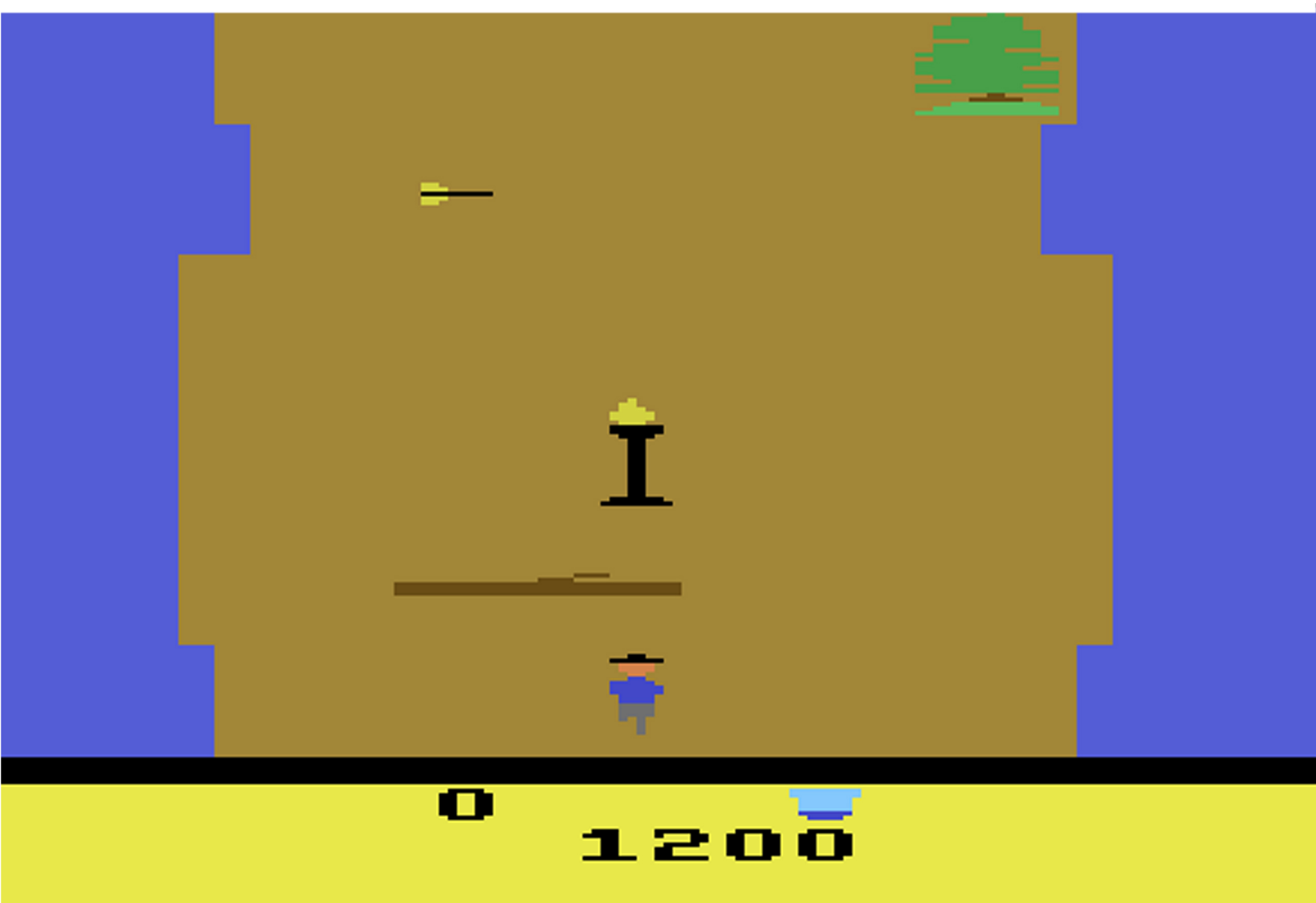
The gameplay is very high end for a 2600 game. There are numerous objects flying at your head such as arrows and tomahawks, as well as ground based obstacles that must be avoided. There are two primary goals on your run though the gauntlet, putting out fires and providing the elders of the tribe with water. You must be careful with how you dish out the H2O, as you have a limited supply.





Your adventurer has two methods of avoiding death, a jump and a slide. Utilizing the slide takes a little getting used to, but when used effectively it can be incredibly satisfying. There is nothing like running at full speed, sliding under a tomahawk, then immediately leaping over some logs like you are an eighteenth century parkour expert.

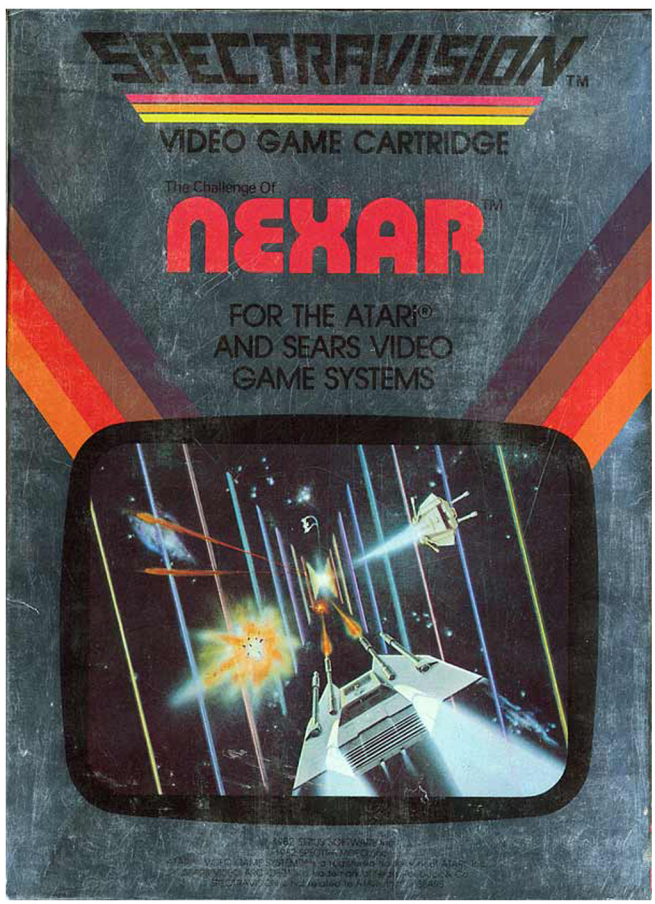
Sir Wittenbottom is very durable and can take numerous hits per life, which makes this game very accessible regardless of skill level. It's a shame that Gauntlet didn't get a wide release, because it could very easily have been a big hit rather than the ultra obscure gem that it is.



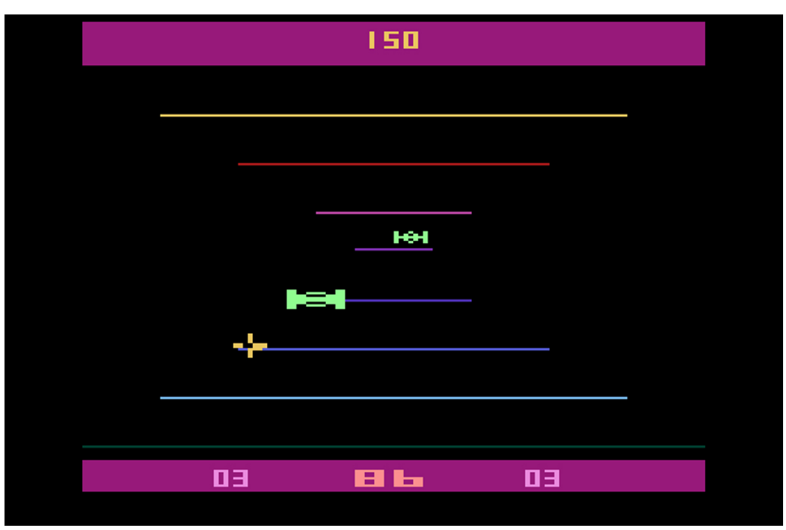
CHALLENGE OF NEXAR

System: Atari 2600 **Release Date: 1982**

Welcome to the Challenge of Nexar and congratulations on taking your first step towards becoming the Spectra-Warrior. If you somehow survive the increasingly difficult ninety-nine levels you will be granted the aforementioned title. In the much more likely event that you fail miserably your family can expect to receive a nicely typed form letter informing them of your untimely demise. Good luck.



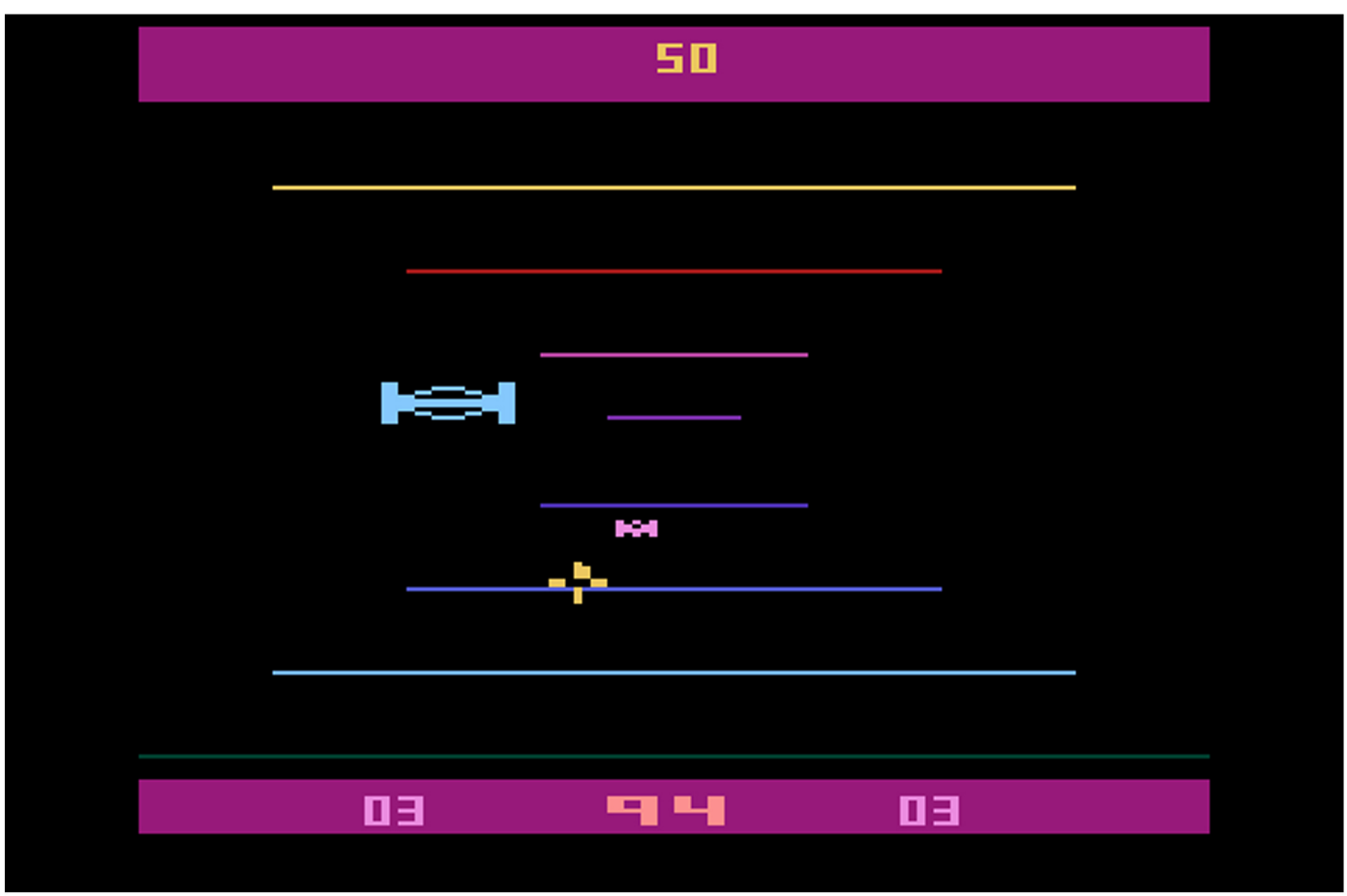
When you embark on your journey you will find yourself at the controls of a lonely crosshair that is traveling down an enemy filled warp zone. Your mission is to destroy a set number of Radioactive Beacons that randomly appear along the way. Standing in your way is a never ending stream of kamikaze Tie-Fighters that are incredibly good at their mission. They are so good in fact that even after you reduce their ship to flaming rubble they can still kill you, which means if you want to blow them up you have to make sure you do it at a distance to give yourself enough time to avoid the debris.



At the start of the first level you are given the rather easy task of destroying three beacons in ninety-nine seconds. If you complete that task you travel further into the warp zone where you have a fresh clock to destroy four beacons. Every time you are successful at your beacon destroying mission you get a brand new clock and one additional beacon to hunt down. Needless to say, this becomes an incredibly difficult task relatively quickly since the beacons randomly spawn, meaning you have little to no control when it comes to the things you have to destroy actually being on screen for you to destroy. It's all kind of a moot point anyway since the enemy ships begin acting like a magnet to your ship after only a few levels.

The graphics are fairly decent for this type of game. The enemy ships do resemble the Tie-Fighters from Star Wars, and the beacons are easy enough to pick out of a crowd. While there is no scrolling background, there is a nice illusion of movement thanks to a trio of lines at the top and bottom of the screen that change colors in a scrolling pattern. Unfortunately it does have the ability to give some people (myself included) a splitting headache due to the faux motion.

At the end of the day, this is a middle of the road space shooter. There are some that are better and some that are way worse. It's worth a look for those who want to blow up imitation Tie-Fighters.

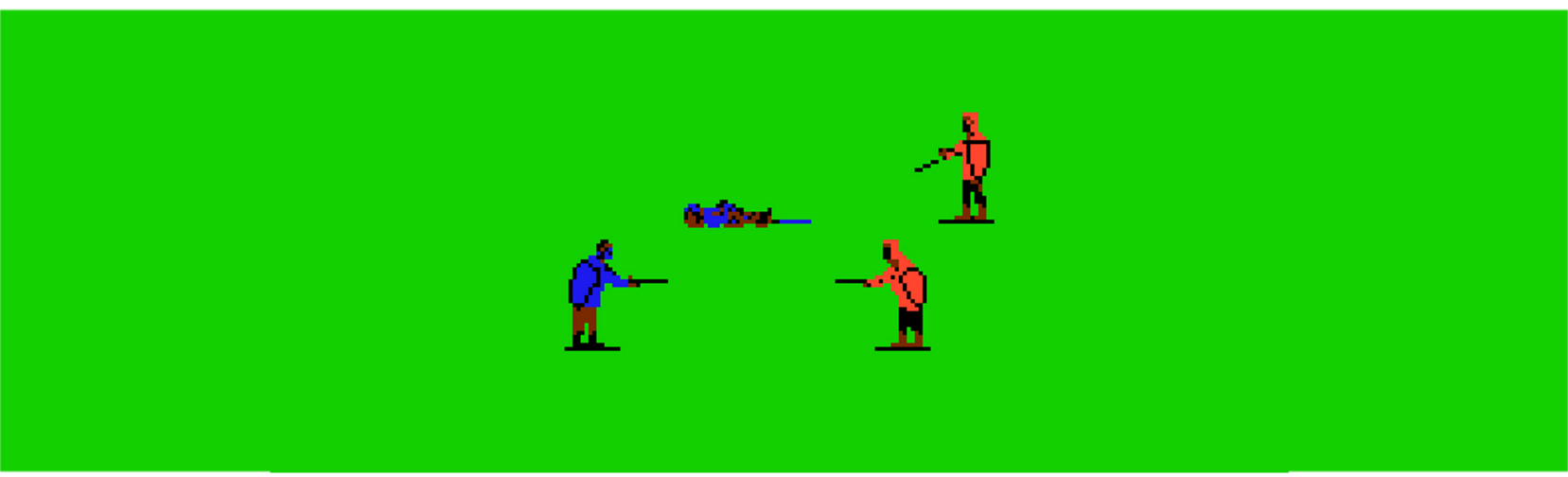


System: NES
Released: 1989
Players: 1
Publisher: Ultra

On paper this sounds like a great game. Robin Hood himself is asking you to save England from destruction, and you get to do so by playing an action/strategy hybrid. How could this possibly go wrong? A number of ways actually....

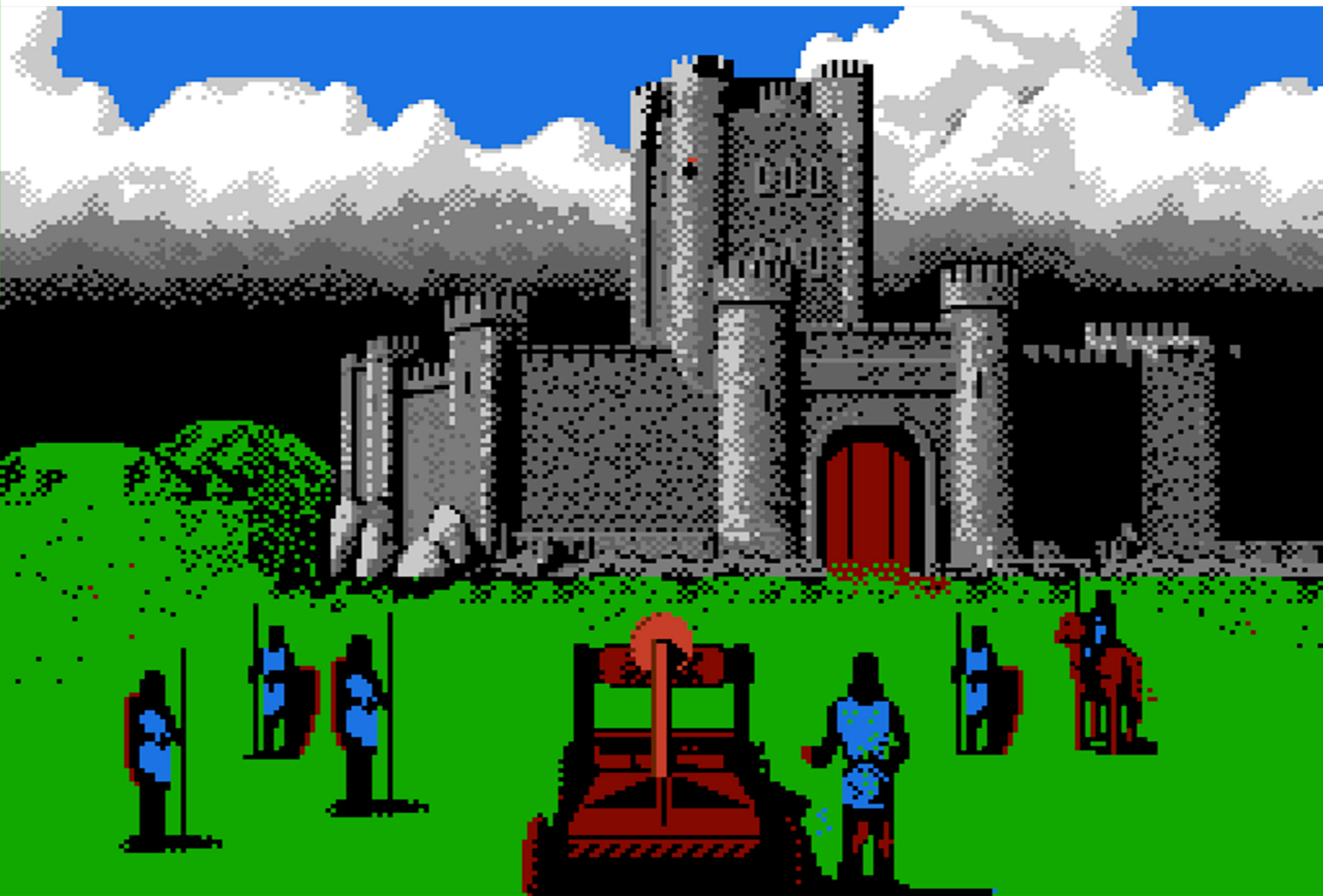
The setup is simple enough, you pick one of four kingdoms that are vying to control England, and you set out to conquer the countryside on your way to total dominance. The problem is, the game tries to be too many different things, and as a result it fails at everything.

The strategy portion of the game has you raising an army and taking over adjacent lands to build your empire. When you come up against a rival kingdom you are locked in combat until one side dies or retreats back to their home castle. Even though this is pretty standard stuff it would still be passable if it weren't for a few glaring issues. The biggest of these problems is the fact that there are a total of 19 territories that you are fighting over. Given that there are four kingdoms, it gets really crowded really quickly. Imagine playing a game of Risk with four people and only being able to play on Asia and Australia and you begin to see the problem.



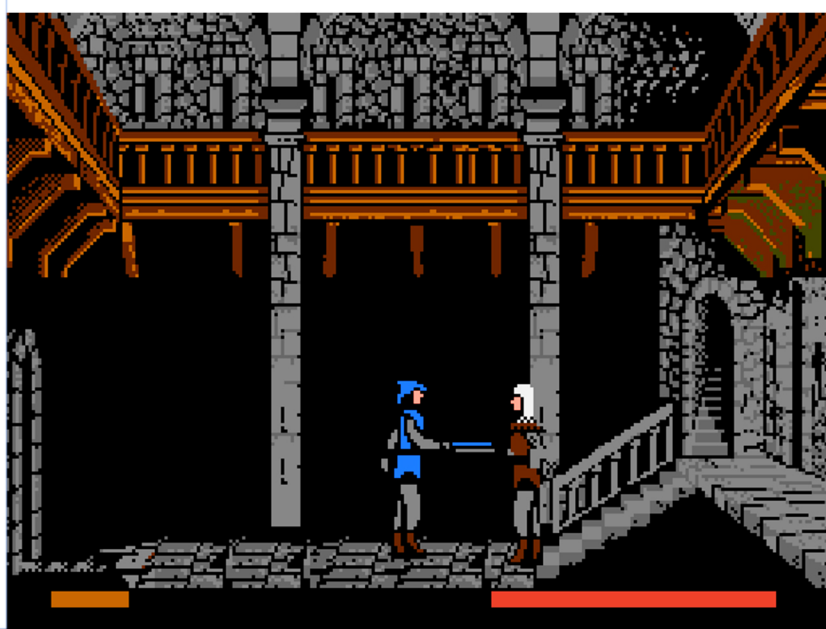
If that were the only issue with the strategy portion then the game might be salvageable, but the battle system is a complete mess. Apparently this game takes place before the invention of scouts because you can't tell how many enemy soldiers are in a territory. As a result most of the skirmishes will either be a cakewalk or a complete slaughter (mostly the latter). The battles themselves are basically a spectator sport since more often than not the battle will already be decided by the time you figure out what strategy you want your army to undertake. The conflicts are so bad that even the armies involved don't seem to care since they are standing on their own side of the battlefield and randomly thrusting their swords (although if they were in a fight with the air they would be winning hands down).

The only portion of the strategy section that actually works is when you attack an enemy castle you get to bombard them with your catapult. You get to knock down walls with giant boulders, set their homes ablaze with greek fire, and even give their citizens the plague in order to thin out the herd for the upcoming battle. Sadly you only get 6 shots, and they come and go really quickly.



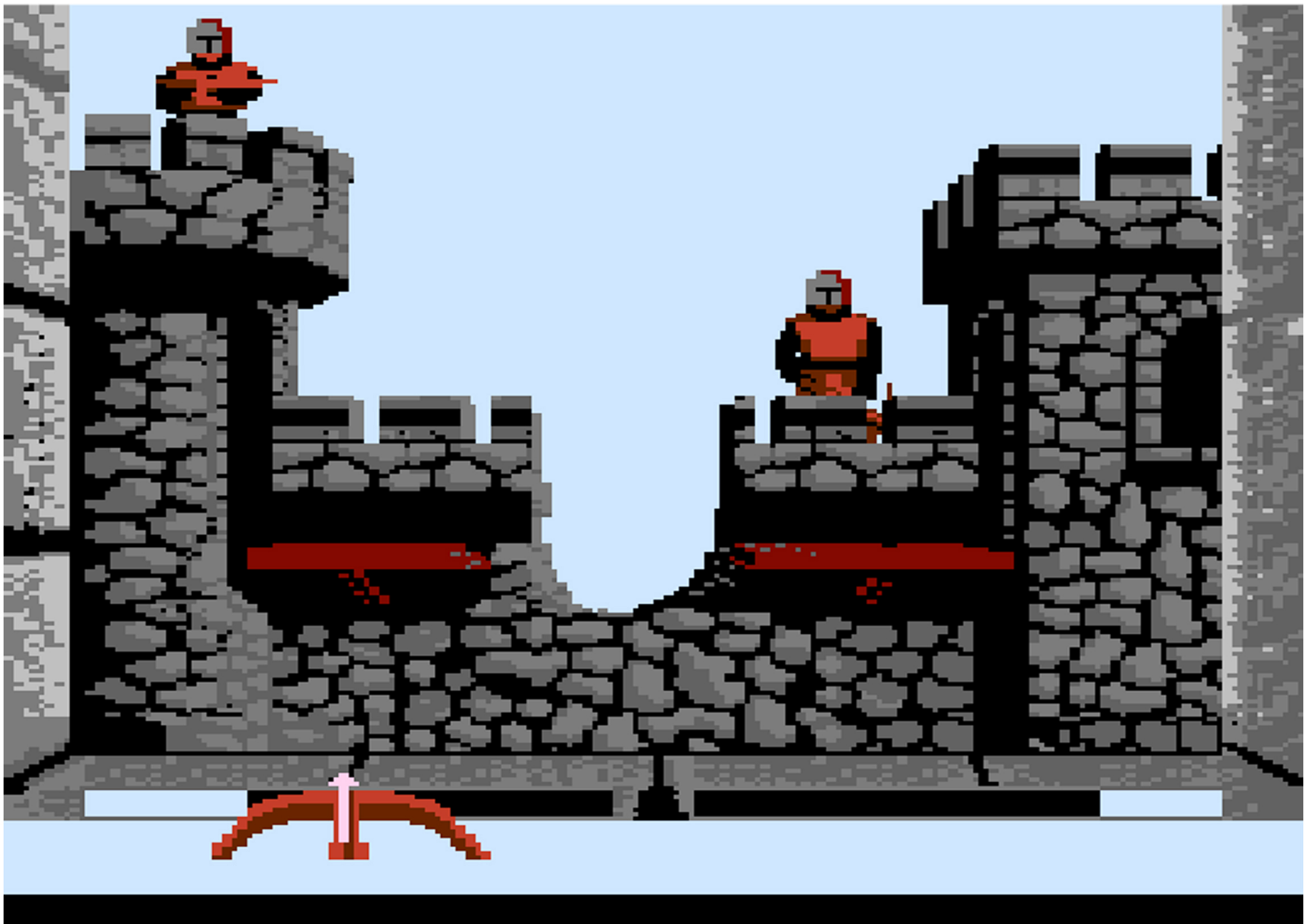
So the strategy portion of the game is a complete bust, what about the action portion? Amazingly enough it's actually worse than the strategy segment. Take the castle raid option for example. At any given time during your turn you can send a lone swordsman into an enemy castle and attempt to steal half his gold. Instead of being an epic showdown between your swordsman and the guards, you get to watch two men with swords take turns stabbing each other. Seriously, both you and the guards move like they are cardboard cutouts that have their joints cemented into place and can only muster up enough strength to thrust their sword about six inches away from them.

(Side Note: The sword also happens to be attached to the swordsman and guards hips, which means every single sword thrust is at crotch level. If this fighting style was prevalent during this time period it kinda makes you wonder how anybody in that region of the world was able to procreate and keep the human race going).



The other action sequence has you defending your castle from invaders using only a single crossbow. Now it doesn't matter if you have 10 men in your garrison or 100, it's still just you and a crossbow. Basically it boils down to a life or death game of whack a mole, since enemy soldiers will randomly pop up on your castle walls and you have to aim and fire. Chances are if you see this screen the next thing you will see is "Game Over" since the computer does a nice job of spacing out the enemy soldiers just far enough away from each other so that no matter how quick you are on the trigger, they are always going to get a shot off before you kill them.

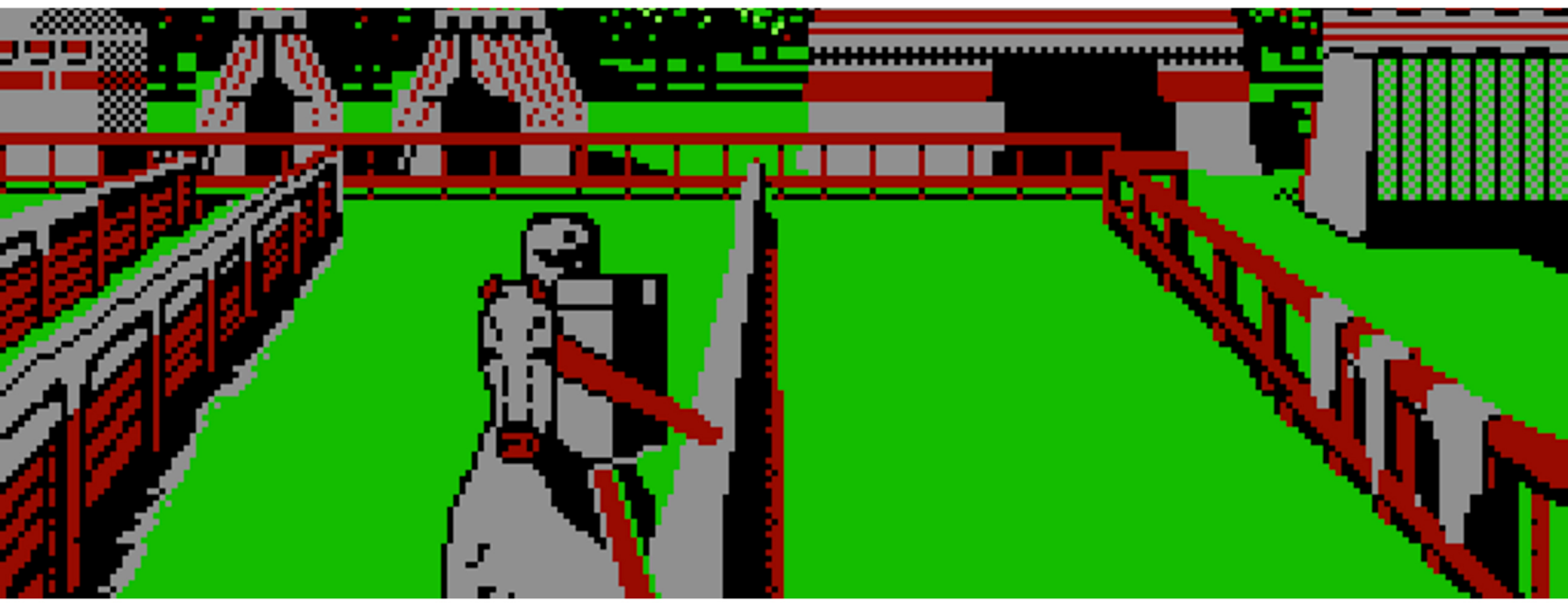
Last but not least we have the only moderate fun portion of the game, the tournament. Every few turns or so you can call a tournament where you can challenge each of the other leaders on the island to a two part duel featuring a joust and a fully armored mace battle. This tournament isn't just for kicks though, as by winning these challenges you can improve your fame or you can expand your empire by wagering your lands against other kingdoms. Well, you can expand it for a turn since winning land you can't reinforce just means your enemies only need to send a single soldier over in order to recapture it.

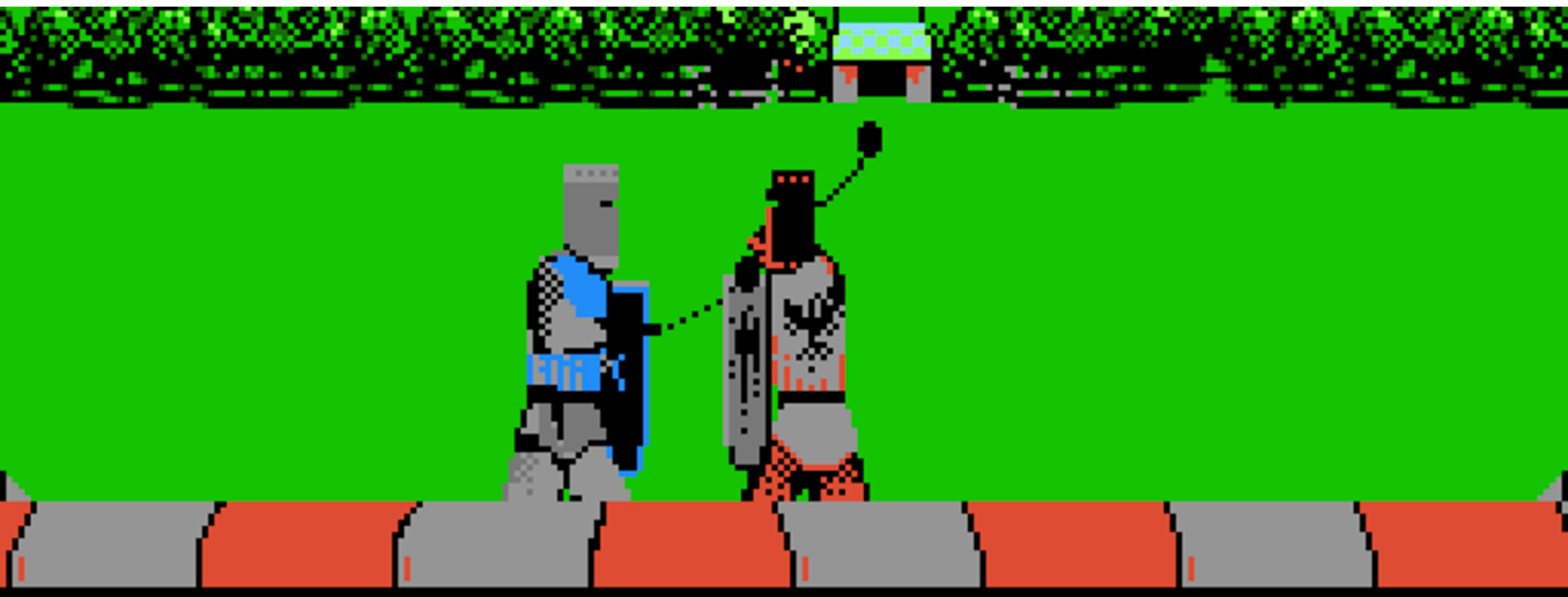


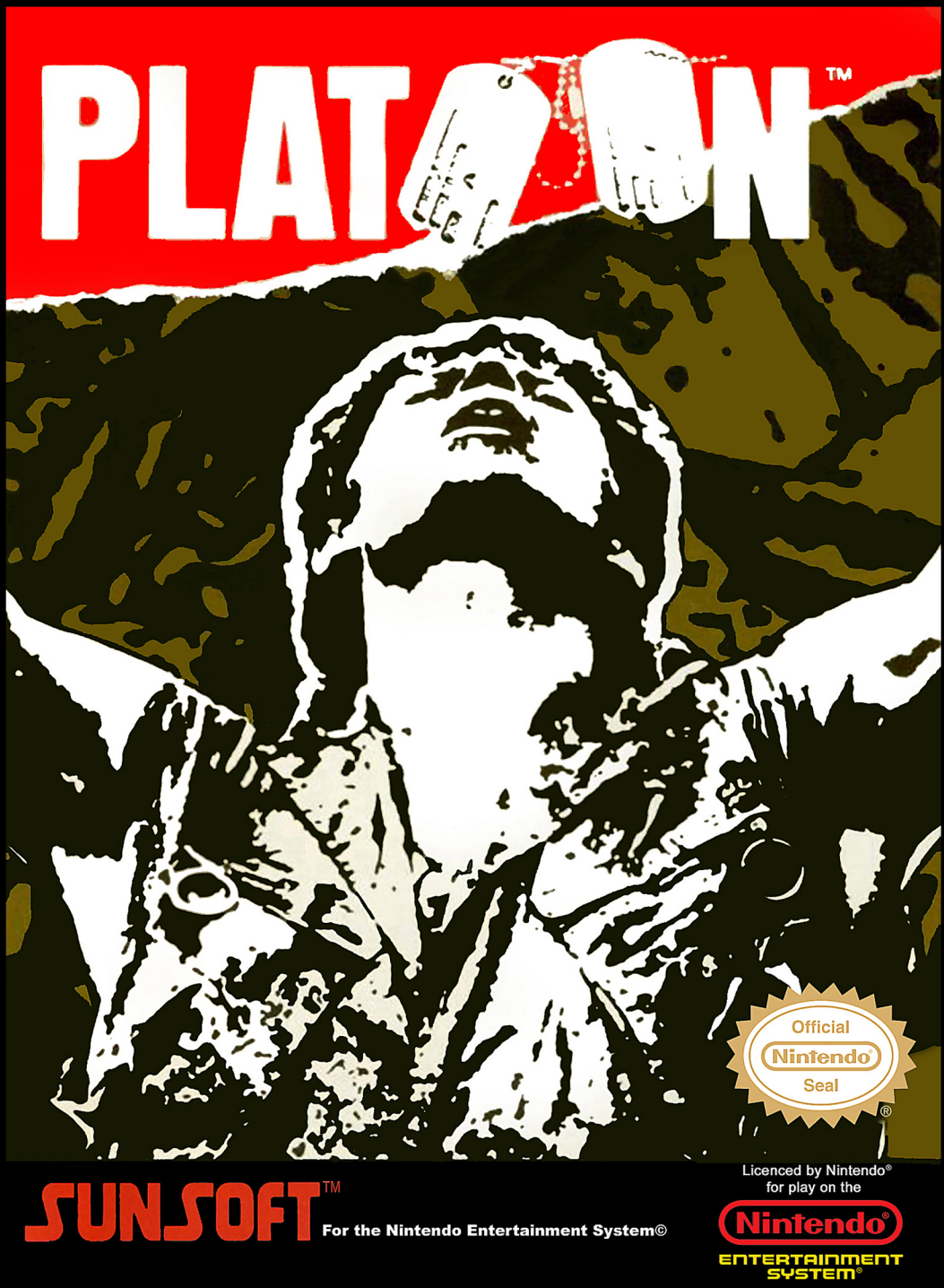
The jousting segment is short but actually entertaining. You mount your trusty steed and run full force at your opponent while trying to aim a giant piece of wood at his shield. If you aim just right you knock him off his horse and get a major advantage in the second part of the tournament, however if you aim wrong you get disqualified. The only two ways to get kicked out is to land a direct shot to his face or to take out his horse sending him flying, which is surprisingly easy and fun to do. Sure you will be kicked out of the tournament and stripped of all your lands, but chances are your opponent will take such a lick that he's going to spend the rest of his days thinking he's the 7 year old Dutchess of Windsor. And believe me, it's totally worth it since it's unlikely you will ever emerge victorious in the main campaign, so this is your only real chance to inflict damage on your rivals.

The mace battle is similar to the sword fighting, with a few minor exceptions. The first one is that you have a shield that you can raise up or down, and the second one is that you can actually aim your mace at your opponents head or someplace a bit more sensitive . Even when you land direct hits to unshielded areas the health meter doesn't always go down. Basically you just have to keep wailing away at your opponent until the health meter decides you've caused enough brain and crotch trauma to declare you the winner. At the end of the fight you will have respect for your fallen opponent, since any man that can take a dozen mace shots to the junk, armored or otherwise, is a real man (granted he may sound like a 6 year old girl, but he's still a man).

Jousting aside, Defender of the Crown is a pretty dull and frustrating game. It would take the average player dozens of games before they got good enough to win against the computer, of course by that point they would cease being "average" players and would instead be considered "masochistic" players.







System: NES
Released: 1988
Players: 1
Publisher: Sunsoft

PLATOON

Platoon brings home the violence and the horror of the Vietnam war in vivid 8-Bit detail. Wait, who thought this was a good idea given the average gamer at the time wasn't old enough to get into the movie it's based on?

Sure there were other 'R' rated movies that were turned into NES games, like Die Hard and The Terminator, but those games were based firmly in a fantasy world. Even though they were 'R' rated and filled with violence, it was over the top unbelievable violence filled with car chases and epic shootouts. Platoon on the other hand was an Oscar winning drama (staring Charlie Sheen no less) that focused on the very real violence of the Vietnam war. Not just real violence, but violence that included graphic death as well as slaughtering of innocent civilians. Hardly the type of subject fit for the video games at the time. That said, if the game had been even halfway decent it might have been given a pass. Sadly though that is not the case here.

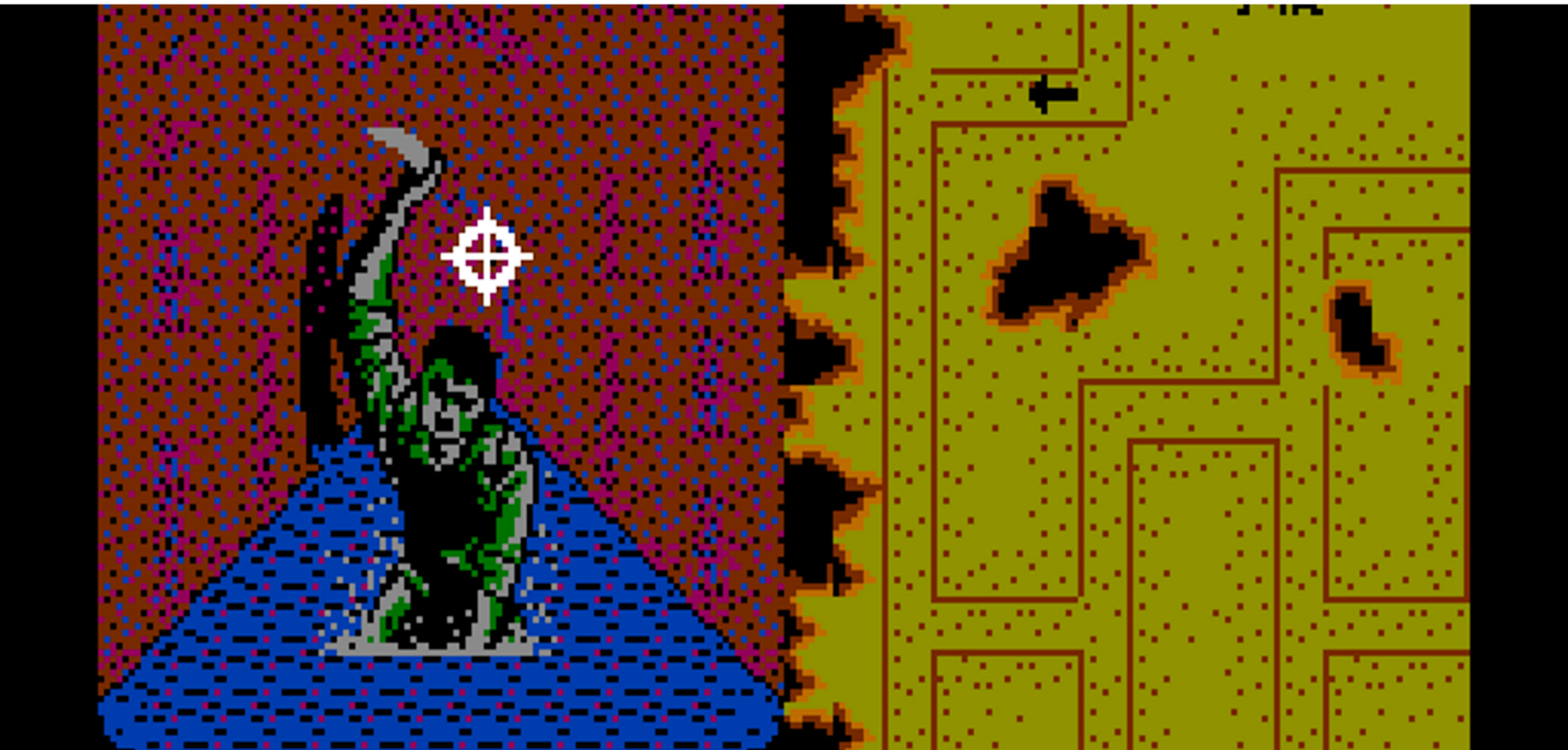
This is one of the most difficult and infuriating games ever to grace the NES, or any system for that matter. Most games are nice and give you a chance to get the feel of things before ramping up the difficulty. Not Platoon however. In fact I'd be willing to bet that the vast majority of gamers in the 80's never saw past the first level.

When you hit start you are thrown into jungle combat with a simple two part mission. First you must locate some explosives that have been dropped by a comrade, then you must find your way to a bridge and blow it up. Sounds simple enough doesn't it? Well, it isn't.

For starters everything in the jungle looks identical, so finding your way through the maze of screens becomes very difficult unless you had a buddy drawing you a map as you went along. I know what you are thinking, "so what if everything looks the same? It's the first level of a game, how hard could they make it?". Well in order to find the explosives you must complete 10 screens in the correct order, which actually isn't too bad since there are only so many ways you can go in the beginning. Once you find the explosives however you must blindly make 24 correct moves in a row in order to find a bridge. Thanks to there not being a map of any kind, if you make one wrong move you are going to be spending eternity wandering the forrest.

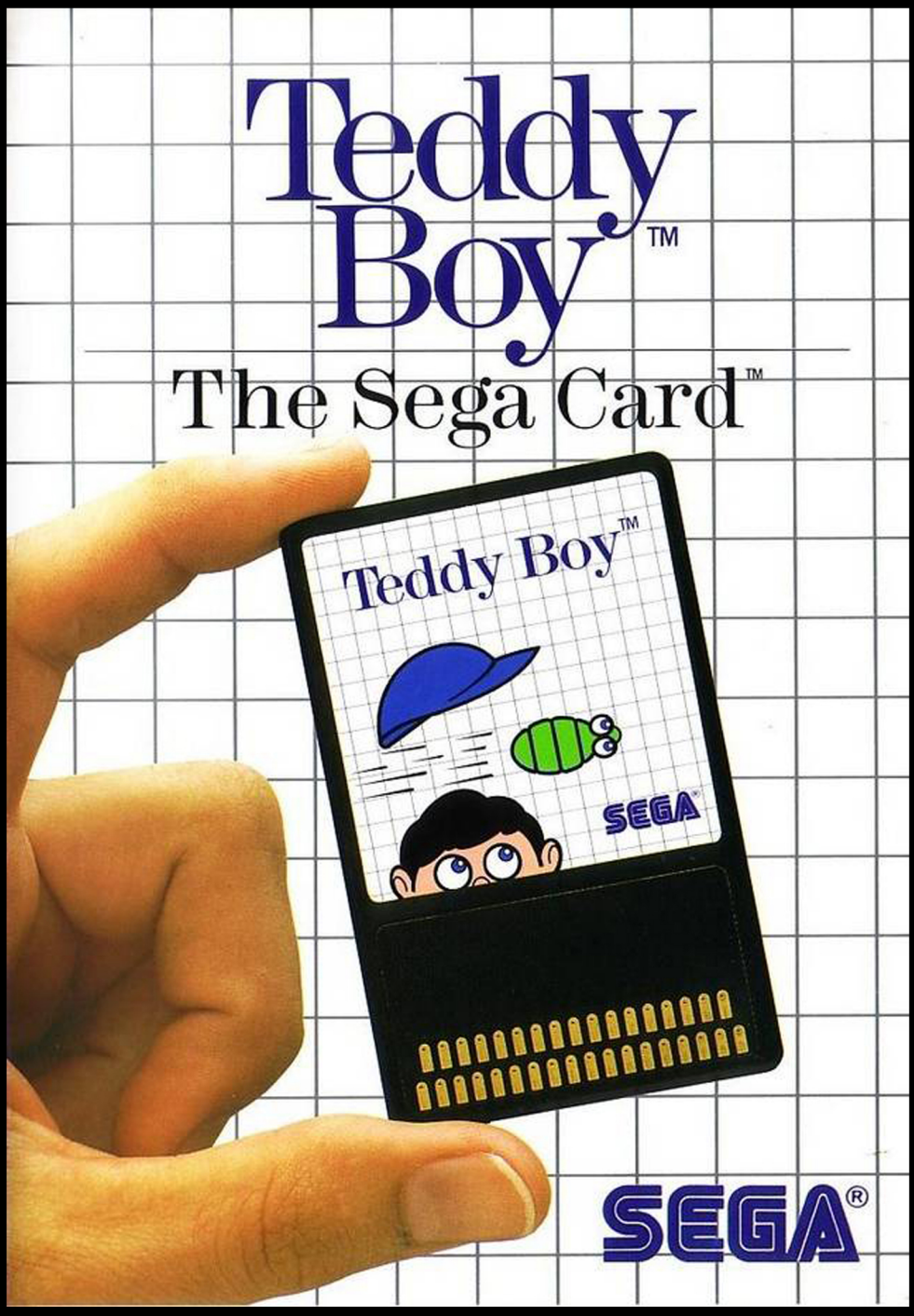
If you are lucky enough to find your destination (or smart enough to use an FAQ that lists the steps) you are rewarded with a much more infuriating level, the Sewers! Yes that's right, you get to wade through a first person perspective maze filled with waist high sh..err...water...all while dodging vietcong attacks. This wouldn't be so bad if the targeting system wasn't completely broken. As you walk, your targeting sight rocks back and forth, but once you are engaged by an enemy you automatically gain control of the sight. Unfortunately you are usually pushing up on the controller at the time, which means while the vietcong who just jumped out at you is taking aim at your head, you are pointing your gun at the ceiling. The lone upside to this level is that there is a map that let's you know where you are, which is nice since your buddies will know where to place a tombstone in your honor.

I wish I could say that the problems end there, but in reality they are compounded by other design issues. The biggest of which is the fact that in the jungle level you have to press up in order to jump. This doesn't sound like a big deal until you realize that pressing up also lets you walk up paths to a different screen, so when you're in the middle of a firefight and are trying to jump over an enemy booby trap you'll sometimes take a leisurely stroll up to a different screen. The other headache is that in the sewer level you have a single clip of ammunition. Of course this isn't as big a deal as it could have been considering that you're often shooting the ceiling while the Vietcong treats your body like a bullet piñata, so it's unlikely you will live long enough to empty that clip.



Platoon also continues with the video game tradition of having the stupidest commanders known to man. The first two missions have you rummaging through enemy strongholds in order to find explosives, flares, and a compass. A freaking compass. How strained was our military budget during Vietnam that we couldn't afford to give our soldiers who were fighting in the middle of a jungle a compass? I mean the Boy Scouts had stacks of them, as well as any kid whose parents bought them a box of cereal that had a crappy "educational" toy in the bottom of it, you'd think we could spare a few for our boys in uniform. Just once I would like to play a war based video game where the soldier is properly armed for the combat situation they are being thrown in to.

The only other thing I have to say about Platoon is, why? Why of all the 80's Charlie Sheen movies did they pick Platoon to make into a video game? If anybody making games in the 80's had any sense at all they would have turned Red Dawn into a game. I mean if ever there was an 80's movie that stared Charlie Sheen that needed to be made into an 8-Bit video game, it was Red Dawn (OK, OK, Major League would be up there too). Actually, now that I think about it, all you homebrew game makers out there, if somebody makes a Red Dawn NES game I will totally do a feature on it in future volumes. This needs to happen. WOLVERINES!

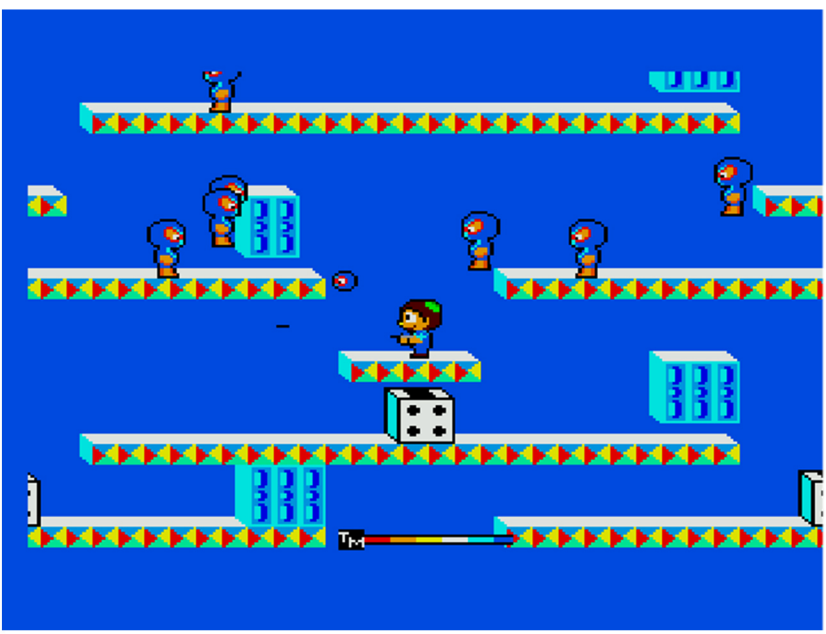


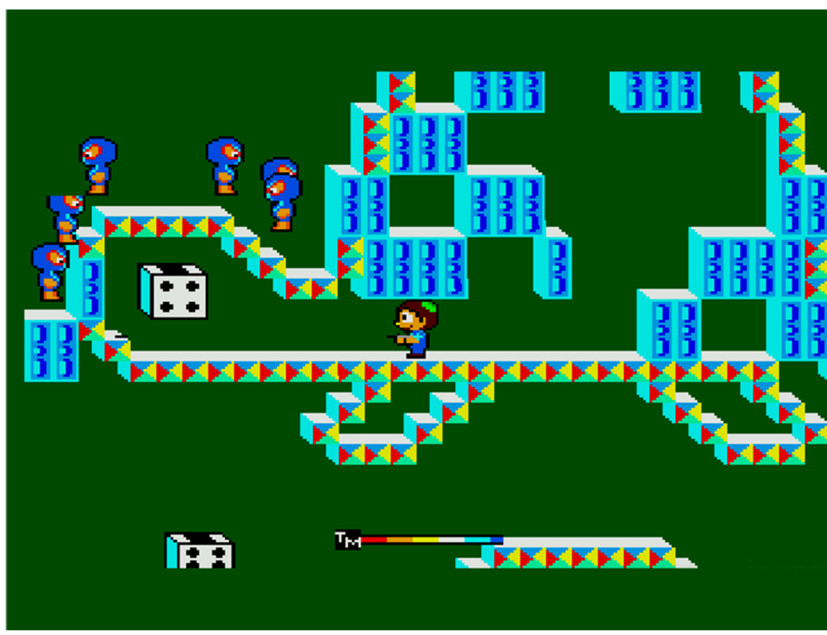
System: Sega Master System
Released: 1986
Players: 1 - 2
Publisher: Sega

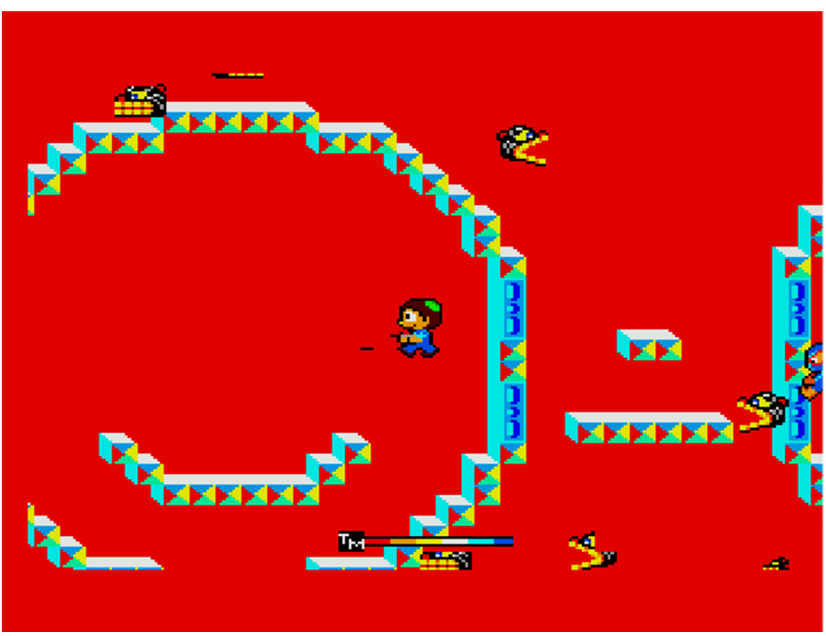
TEDDY BOY

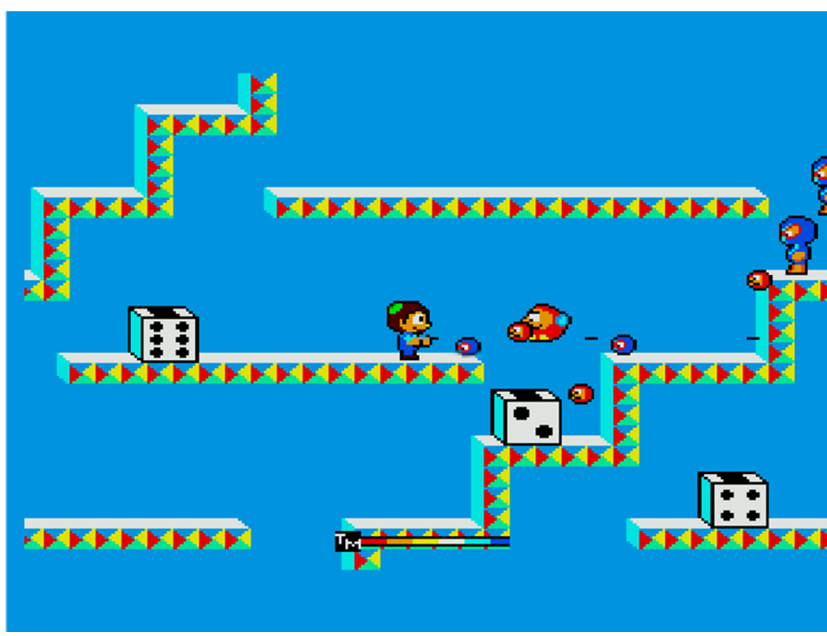
If you ever wondered if there was a game out there that combined a gun toting kid, ninjas, and a healthy supply of beer and smokes, then wonder no more because Teddy Boy combines those together and so much more into a straight up 80's style arcade game in it's purest form. There is no story to finish, no heroine to rescue, only a high score that is in need of eclipsing.

The setup for the game is simple, you control a kid wearing a yarmulke (or yamaka for those who are lazy and don't want to look that up) as he journeys through fifty mazes shooting everything in sight. The levels are all relatively small infinite loop mazes, meaning that if keep running to the right or jumping up and up you'll end up right back where you started. This impacts the gameplay as you have to be careful when dropping down to the levels below you, as the enemy that is at the top of the screen could very easily be waiting below you as well. It also plays into your strategy as it requires you to think outside the box when trying to track down that last remaining enemy.









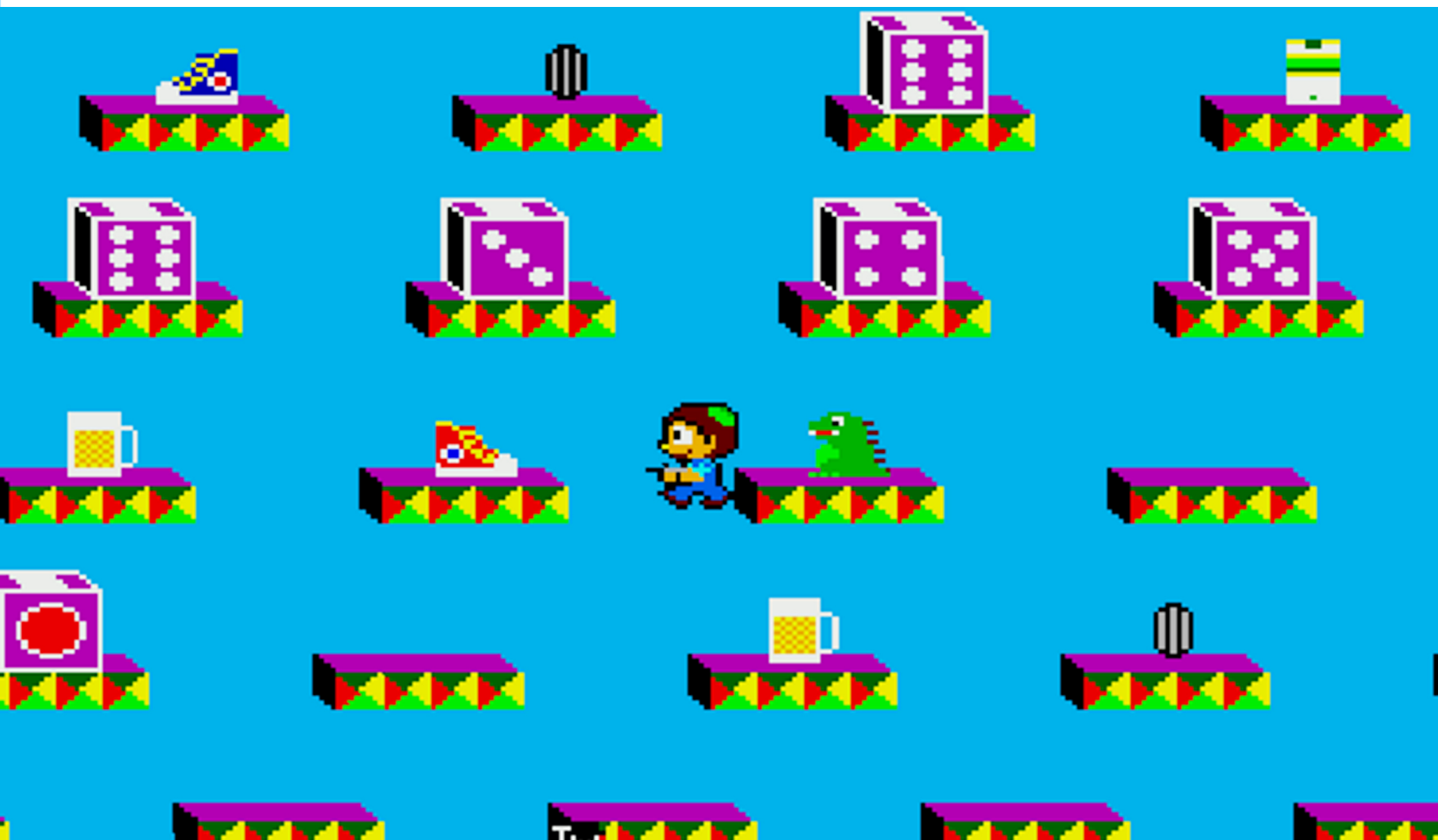
Speaking of enemies, there are a lot of strange and annoying ones to be found here. Of course there are the aforementioned ninjas, who do little more than run and jump around like they are five year olds on a pixie stick bender. There are also flying snails that are only vulnerable at certain times, giant slugs that climb on the ceilings and attack you from above, as well as jumping centipede like creatures that have to be taken out one link at a time. The most annoying of the enemies however are the constantly jumping severed alligator heads that are not only lightning quick but also seem to have a yarmulke seeking radar system since they always find a way to hit you no matter where you are standing.

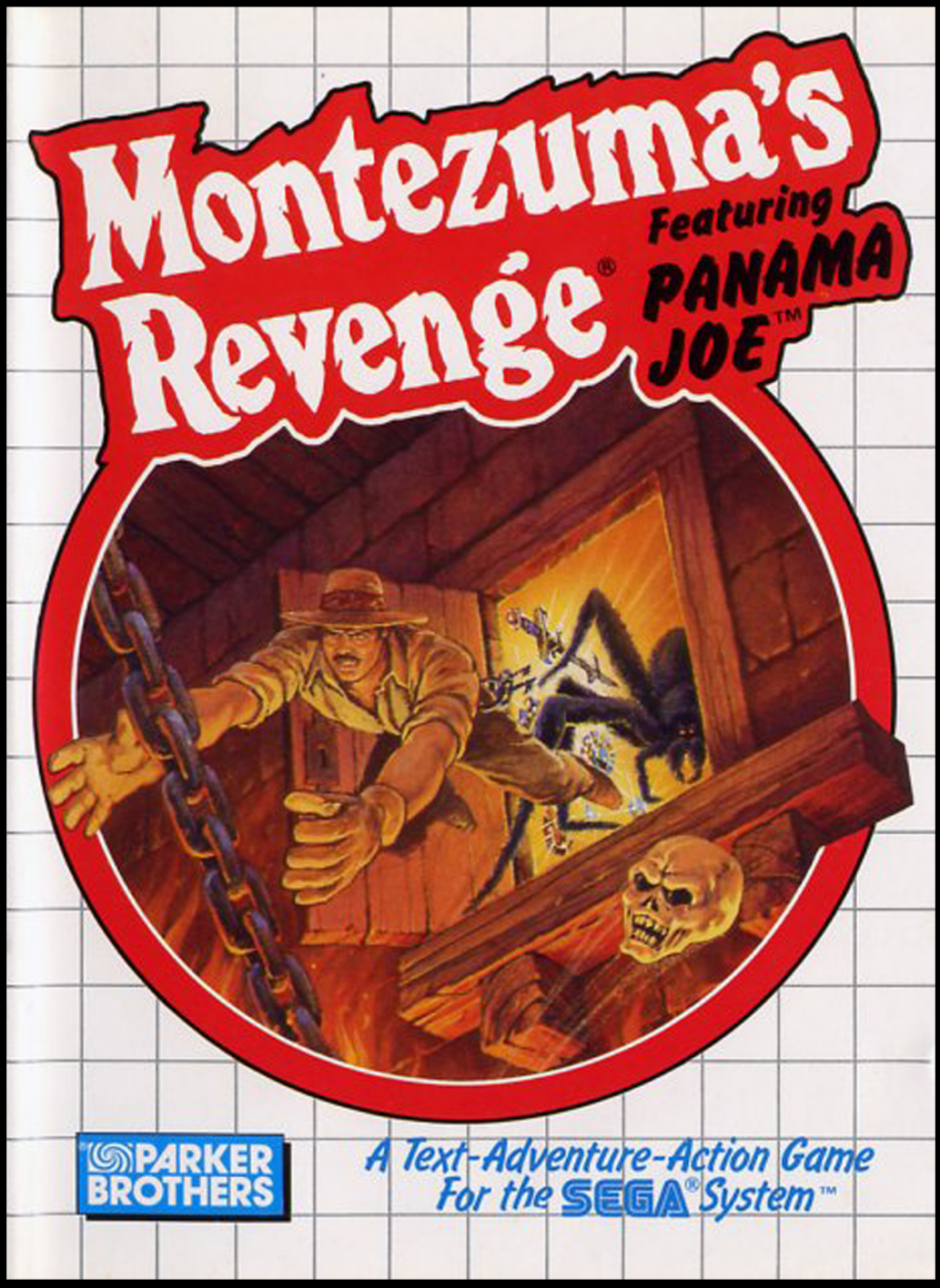
The enemies on each level are a bit of a surprise since none of them are onscreen when the stage begins. When you enter the level you are greeted with several giant dice that are displaying a number (1-6). This number represents how many enemies are going to eventually emerge from that die. This is good in the sense that you know how many more things must be killed before moving on, however it's bad because they always seem to spawn when you are trapped between it and a wall. At least once a round I found myself being cornered by a swarm of flying severed alligator heads only to have a ninja spawn out of a giant die causing me to turn into an arm flapping ghost (apparently Teddy Boy is on a budget since he couldn't afford wings, hence the rapid arm waving to carry him up to heaven).

Yes Teddy Boy features one hit deaths, which is pretty standard for the era and genre, but it's not the only way to get a serious afterlife workout. Like a lot of games in this genre there is a timer that when expired causes you to expire. The difference here is that fallen enemies can have an afterlife of their own that consists of devouring time. When an enemy is shot it turns into a harmless pellet that bounces around the level. When that happens you have mere moments to fight your way over and retrieve it before it becomes a Langolier (Seriously, they look just like those time eating monsters from the TV movie version of the Steven King novel/really bad TV movie). If you aren't careful and allow enough of them to go to town on your timer expect to be flapping your arms in the near future.

Spread throughout the fifty levels are a handful of bonus stages. Not only do these give you a great opportunity to boost your score, but it is also a window into a much simpler time in video game history. The bonus level is pretty basic in that it is filled with dice that when shot, reveals either a prize that are worth points or a Langolier that will eat away at your bonus round timer. Most of the prizes are age appropriate for your yarmulke wearing kid, like high top shoes or a stuffed Godzilla toy. Others, like a mug of beer and a pack of smokes, are probably a bit mature for the young Teddy Boy. I think it goes without saying that if this were included in a modern game that there would be immediate outcry from parent groups, anti-video game activists, and would pretty much be the lead story on all the 24-hour cable "news" networks (provided of course Kim Kardashian wasn't posting another selfie that week). As it stands the smokes and booze provide a nice bit of nostalgia that takes the player back to a simpler time before video games were being accused of destroying western civilization.

And really, that's about all there is to Teddy Boy. If you are looking for a game with a long shelf life this isn't it. Although if you are looking for another title to add to your weekly old school classic game high score battle royale, this should totally be on your list.

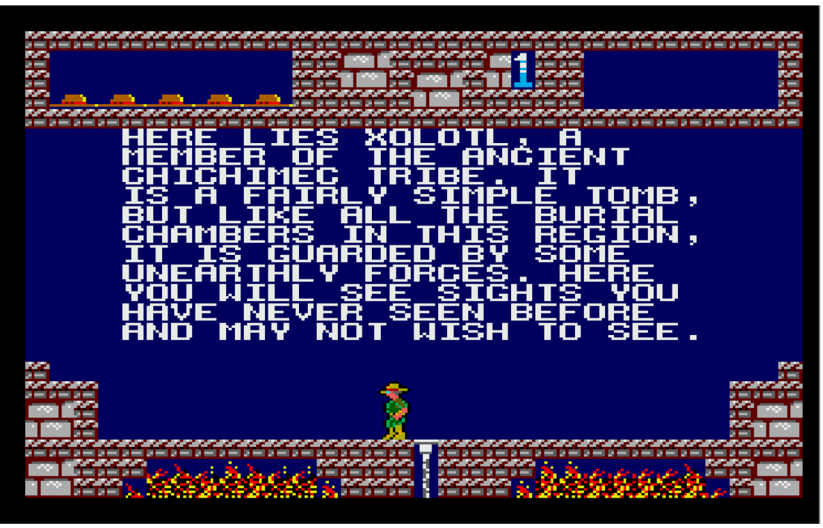


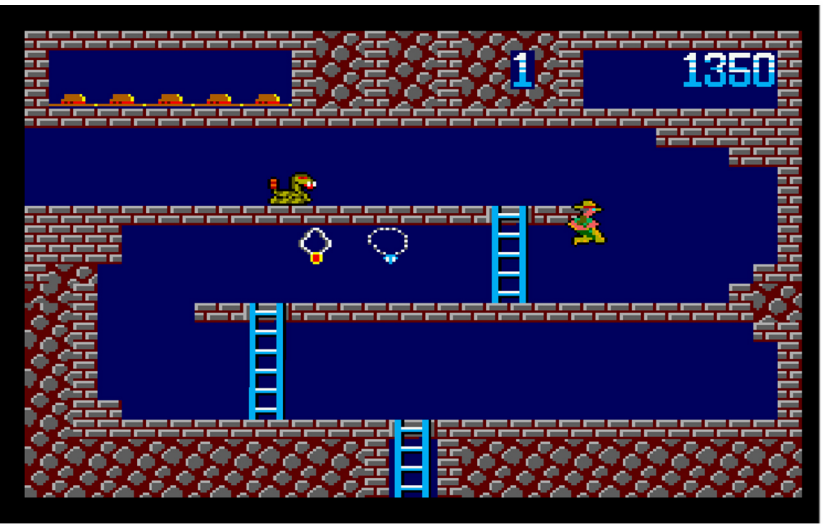


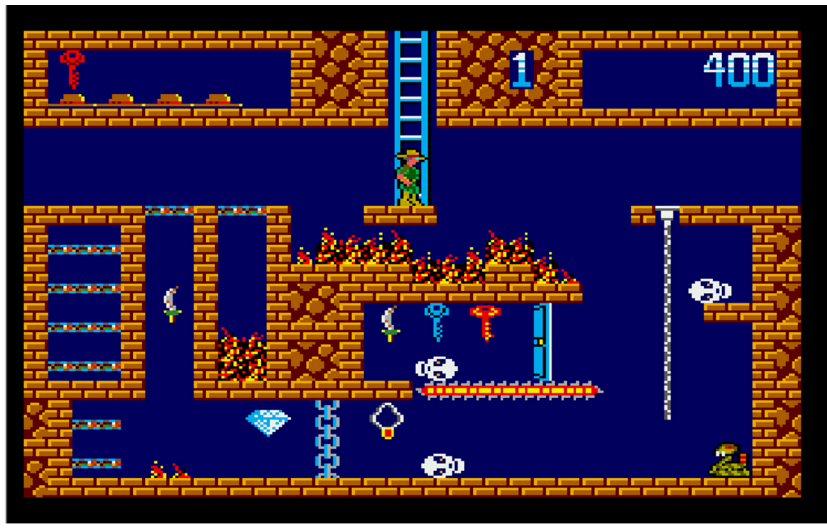
System: Sega Master System
Released: 1989
Players: 1
Publisher: Utopia Software

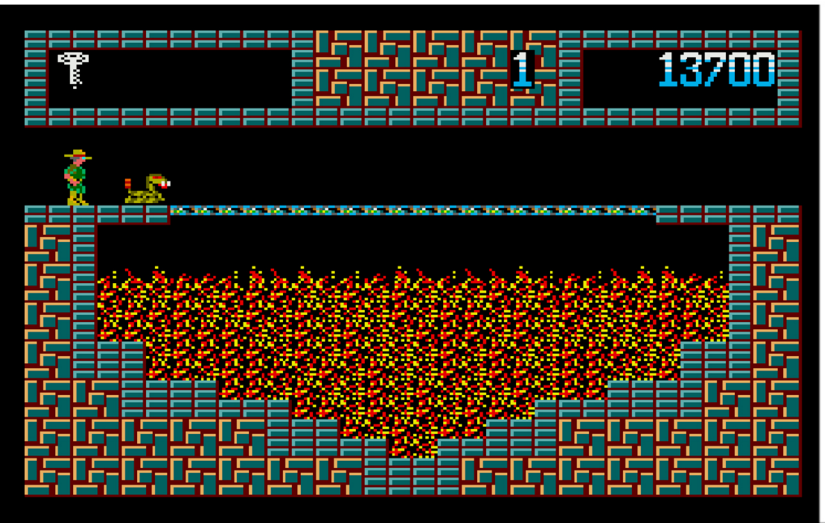
Montezumas Revenge is a tough action platforming game for the Master System, however it is difficult for all the wrong reasons.

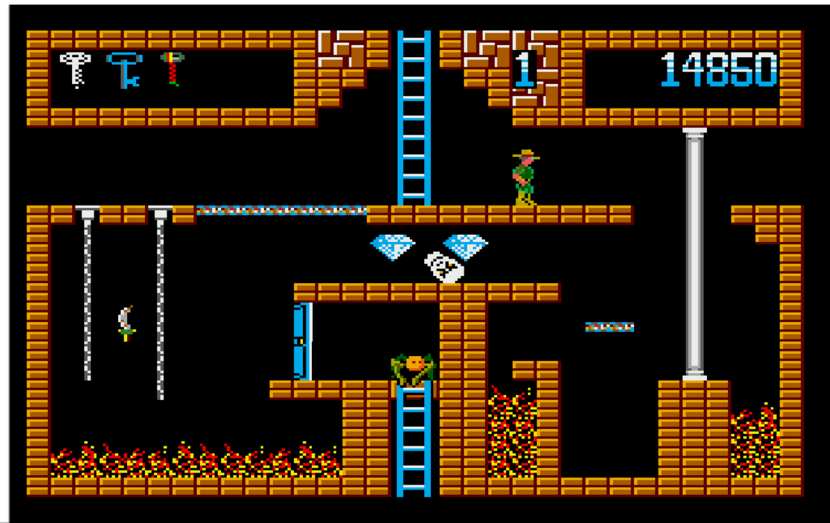
You control Panama Joe as he attempts to rob Montezuma's Aztec Pyramid of all it's valuables. Standing in his way is an army of rolling skulls, rattlesnakes, and laser barriers. Wait, laser barriers? Wow, I knew that the Aztecs were an advanced civilization, but I had no idea they were that far advanced. Not that it really did them a lot of good…



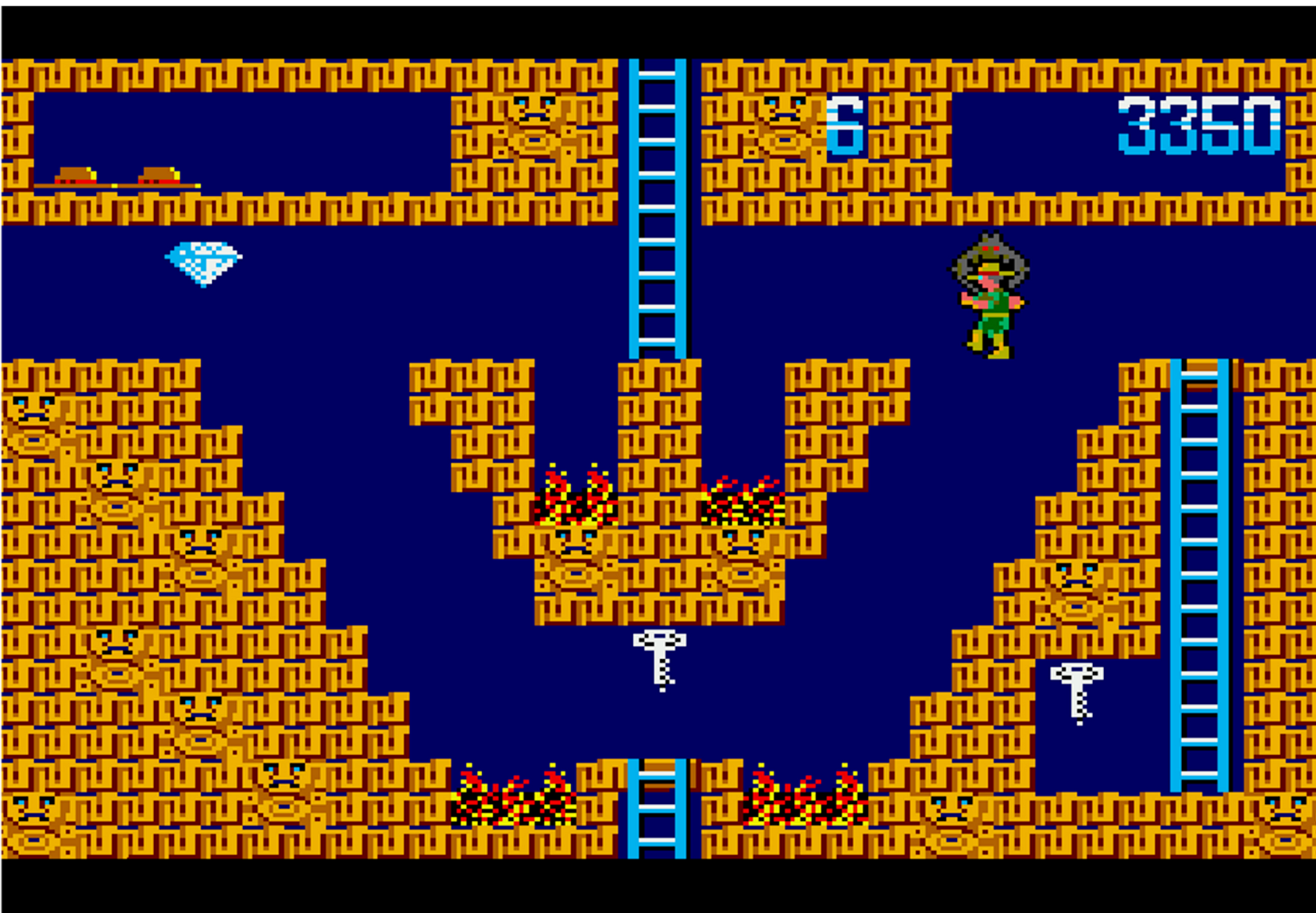




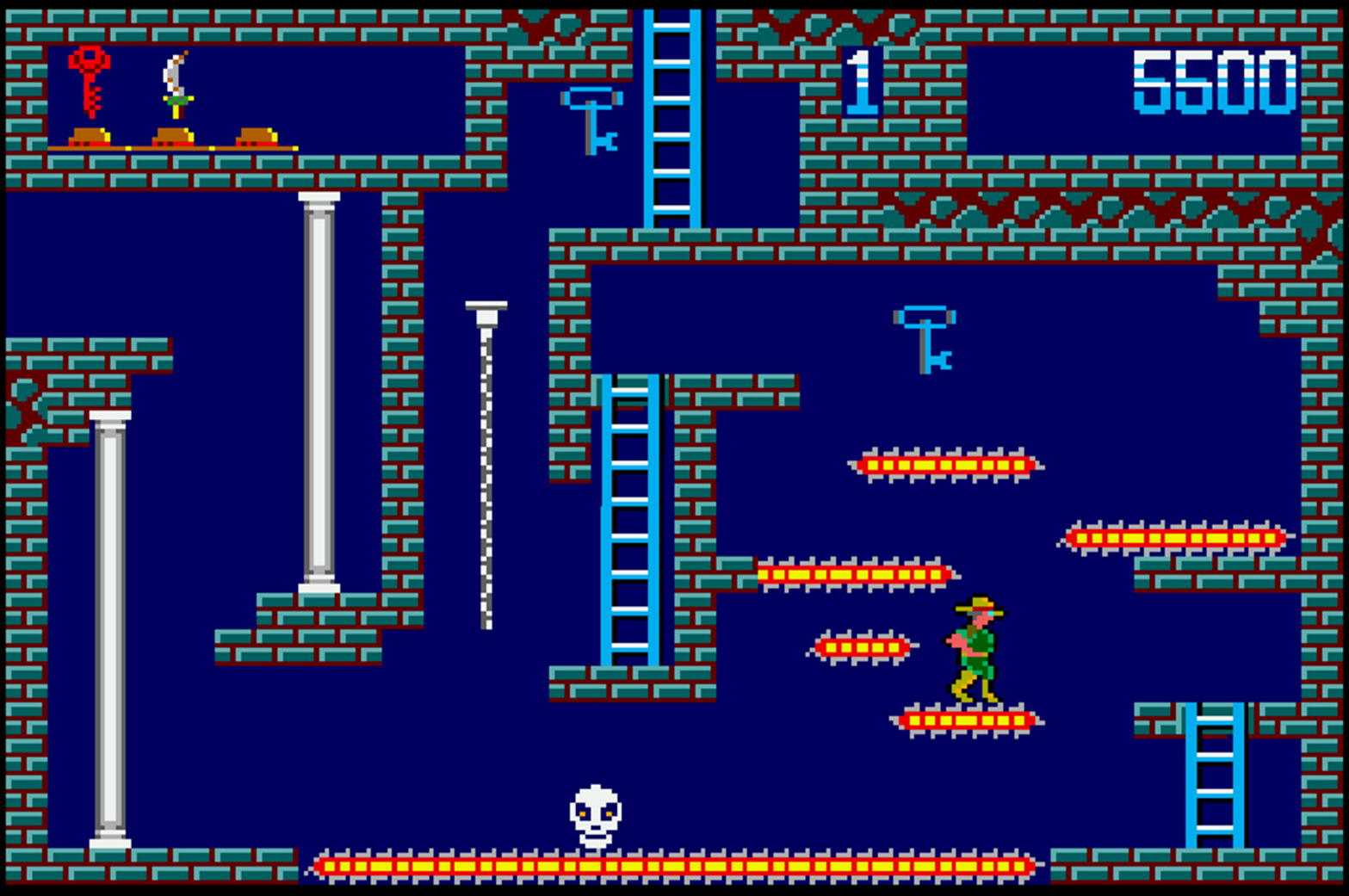




When you start you get to choose from one of six tombs to explore. There isn't a ton of difference in how they play, so it's really just more of a difficulty selection. There are some layout changes, but for the most part it determines how fast the enemies move and how many laser barriers stand in your way. Although the higher levels have one of the cheapest, most infuriating enemies ever to grace a video game screen. If you stay on a screen for more than a few seconds a bat will swoop in, make a beeline for you, and carry you off screen and apparently eat you since you lose a life. There really isn't any escape from it unless you have a weapon handy (which is rare) or you are standing right by an exit.

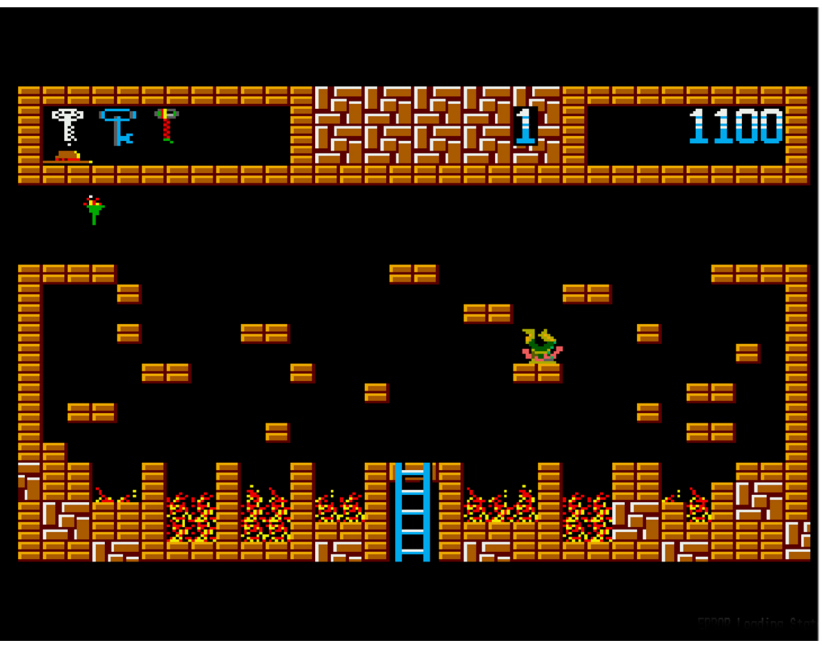


The gameplay is similar to Pitfall in that you run and jump while trying to collect treasure. Unlike Pitfall however your character is cursed with brittle bone syndrome. Now I applaud Panama Joe for not letting his condition slow him down in his quest to become a rough and tumble grave robber, but it makes the game borderline impossible. See, if Panama Joe falls from virtually any height he dies, which not only makes exploring a tomb filled with hundreds of platforms difficult, but it also sucks the fun right out of the game. If you have been playing video games for longer than twenty minutes, you will have to make a conscious effort to suppress your instincts and go running and jumping. To make things worse, there are several precision jumping segments you have to complete, and since you have no control over his jump once he's airborne, expect to watch him plummet to his death on a frequent basis. Honestly, if the designers set out to create a robust ladder climbing simulation they were ultimately successful. Somehow though I doubt that's what they were going for.



In addition to all the treasure you are collecting, you can pick up a number of items to help you along the way. There are a couple of weapons, one of which will kill an enemy if you touch them and another that allows you to run though all enemies for a short time. There are also three varieties of keys, white, blue, and red, which allows you to open doors of the appropriate color. Tracking some of these down can be a chore, especially when you have to complete difficult jumping segments to get them.

The brittle bone syndrome aside, this is a solid game if you can adjust your playing style and suppress virtually every single instinct you have when it comes to playing games.



System: Sega Genesis
Released: 1990
Players: 1
Publisher: Razorsoft

This is arguably the worst game not only on the Genesis, but of the entire 16-Bit era. That said, you totally need to play it right now.

The game is broken up into two different segments, driving and side scrolling action. The driving section begins as you get get a report of some various crime that is in progress, at which point you put the pedal to the metal in an attempt to get to the crime scene before the criminal has completed their task and escaped. Well, you will be trying to put the pedal to the metal. If you just picked the game up and started playing it without glancing at the manual chances are you are hitting all three buttons on the Genesis controller and wondering why your car is just sitting in neutral launching beach balls from the roof. For some reason the designers decided against letting the two unused buttons control the gas and the breaks and instead decided that having to hold up to make your car go was the way to go. Now if the driving portion of the game required you to make precise movements, navigate corners, or spend a lot of time on the road then it would be a major problem. Thankfully there really isn't much to do in the driving segments, plus you aren't going to play past the first couple of stages anyway so it doesn't get too annoying.

Don't get me wrong, the driving segments aren't particularly difficult, just dull. Your car takes up most of the road, which means the enemy cars are going to be few and far between. Well, I'm assuming they are enemy cars but they could very easily just be bad drivers since nobody takes a shot at you or even makes a concerted effort to run you off the road. Half the time you can just drive right by the other cars on the road with no effort whatsoever. Heck, I'm pretty sure if you could figure out how to flash your headlights that they would even pull over and let you pass. The only problems arise when you try and pass one of them in a curve, usually resulting in you tramming a tree at full speed. Also, your car has a health bar that never refills so once it drains your game is over, but once again you aren't going to play this very long so it's a moot point.

OK I'm sure by now you are thinking "why in the world would I want to play this game?", well now that you've gotten past the driving segment it's time to see Technocop's only redeeming value. That value can be summed up in one single screenshot.

Yep, the entire reason you need to play this game is that the Technocop possesses quite possibly the greatest weapon of any hero in the entire 16-Bit era. His main gun is one of the most satisfying ways to clean up the streets that you will ever get to experience. Sure it takes a few shots, but once the no good street thug is filled with enough lead his torso explodes in a wonderful display of 16-Bit gore (this epic display is accompanied by one of the greatest dying noises as well). As if liquifying torsos wasn't great enough, the vanquished foe falls to the ground and twitches his arms, legs, and head before letting out a final gasp. I'm still not sure how someone can let out a final gasp if they don't have a torso, but hey, it's pretty cool to watch.

The violent imagery of exploding torsos was not only groundbreaking (Technocop came out nearly 2 years before Mortal Kombat upped the ante on video game violence), it also crossed a line that no game before it had. When you start the first side scrolling level you will see a happy go lucky kid jumping up and down outside the building doorway. Now why this kid is so excited about living in a prostitute filled crack house that has been taken over by a violent gang is never explained. I do have a theory however. See, I think that this kid knows that the designers knew they were making a terrible game and that the only way they were going to make any money was to make it as controversial as possible, which is why they made it possible for you to put a round in the kids head, thereby putting him out of his misery. Unlike the adults however, the kid doesn't have his chest explode, and instead just falls face first into the concrete. This remains one of the only examples in video game history where you can actually kill the kid.

(Side Note: The kid is the only non-enemy that you can gun down. Think about that for a second, you are running and gunning your way through a crack house filled with drugged out losers and cheap hookers, yet the only innocent civilian you can shoot and kill is the kid. I would say the designers have serious issues that they should probably see a therapist about, but since they were nice enough in a later stage to have the kid running full speed towards you, thereby creating an opportunity to launch the lifeless corpse of the kid across the screen as if you were taking part in a sadists version of the hammer throw I'm going to let them slide).

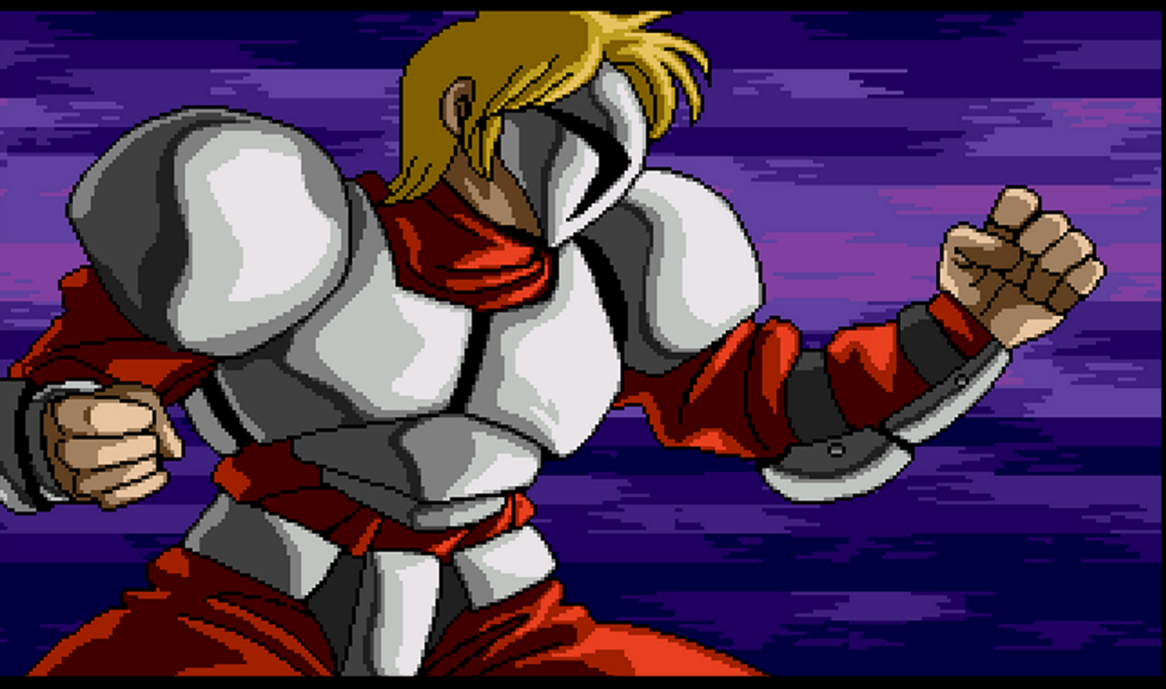
Hardcore violence aside, the side scrolling portions of the game are just as bad as the driving portions. It is virtually impossible to dodge any of the gang members attacks (which range from spiked maces to flying hatchets to ninja stars) which means it's only a matter of time before you die. You only have a short time to find the boss of each level before they escape, and since there is no map of the level you are on the bad guy is going to be escaping more often than not. On top of that the bosses have the absolute worst AI in the history of video games.

Take the first boss for example. Once you find him he rolls a barrel of toxic waste at you. If you are successful in jumping over it you can take your sweet time to line up your shot since the boss doesn't move for the rest of the battle. Not only does he not move, he is frozen in his pushing pose. The magician second level boss isn't much better as he just throws down a couple of smoke bombs before vanishing for good. That's right, he doesn't attack you, he just puts on a magic show and runs away.

The bottom line is the extreme violence is a whole lot of fun for the first couple of levels, but once that excitement wears off the game is nothing but an exercise in tedium. However given that the game can be found on ebay for a couple of dollars there is absolutely no reason why you shouldn't own a copy so you can wield the incredible exploding torso gun any time you want.

System: Sega CD
Released: 1994
Players: 1 - 2
Publisher: Micronet

This is hands down one of the greatest titles in video game history. Sadly Revengers of Vengeance is also one of the greatest examples of a just miss title in the history of gaming.



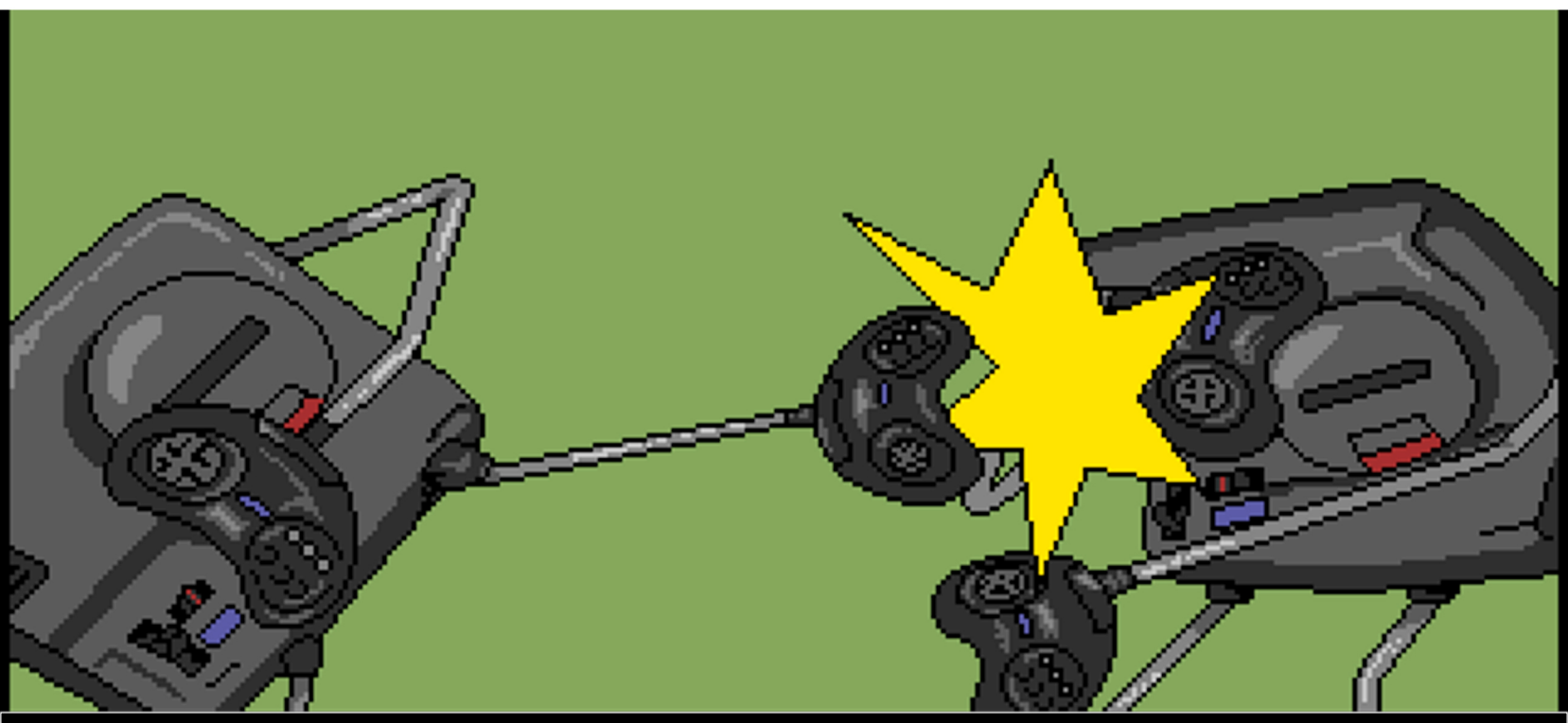
The early 90's was the heyday of fighting games. If you had a video game company or owned a popular property then by god you had to put out a fighting game. The overwhelming majority of these games were little more than blatant cash grabs and were plagued with stock characters, no story, and no extras whatsoever. Revengers of Vengeance set out to stand above the pack, and it did this in a number of ways.

For starters the roster of fighters is incredibly diverse. Sure you have old standbys like a Ninja and a Knight, but you also have a flying Hawk Lady, a Werewolf, a Giant Armored Rino that took up a quarter of the screen, and for some reason you have Vega from Street Fighter II. OK, it might not be Vega, but more like his younger brother that tried to set himself apart from his much more athletic older brother and overdid it on the steroids yet wanted to keep the family connection by wearing the same mask and similar outfit. All told you have your choice between ten very different combatants. From there you have three different choices of gameplay.

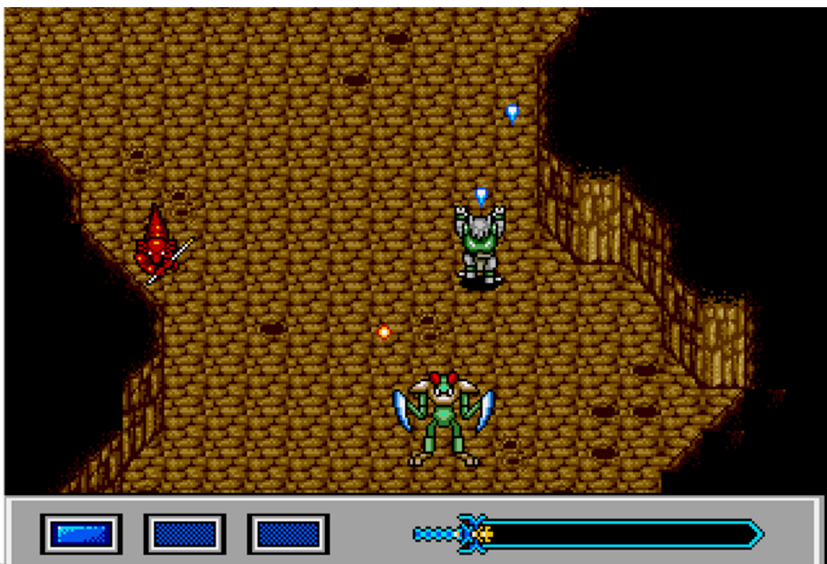
The tournament is exactly what it sounds like, a tournament. This mode is virtually identical to every other fighting game that has ever been released in that you fight your way through the other characters on your way to a final confrontation with the final boss.

The Arena of Death mode had potential to be awesome but instead is little more than a tease. When you start this mode you get to "create" your own unique character by taking one of the existing characters and messing around with their stats. You can make them more aggressive, increase their power, and even decide if you want them to specialize in close combat or ranged attacks. There are eight slots to save your characters which means you can transform virtually the entire cast into the perfect fighting game lineup. Hope continues to build as you and a buddy hit start and you get to select your custom tweaked combatants to do battle against one another. However hope fades quickly as the fight begins and you figure out you have absolutely no control over the combatants. Instead of having the ultimate fighting game chess match where you create the perfect fighter to take on your friends you get to watch an exhibition match between two computer controlled opponents. This could have been one of the coolest modes of the era if only they had let you actually participate in the battle.

(Side Note: While the mode itself is craptacular, the logo for it is one of the coolest you'll ever see. I mean does it get any cooler than two Sega Genesis machines exchanging punches in the ring? I think not).



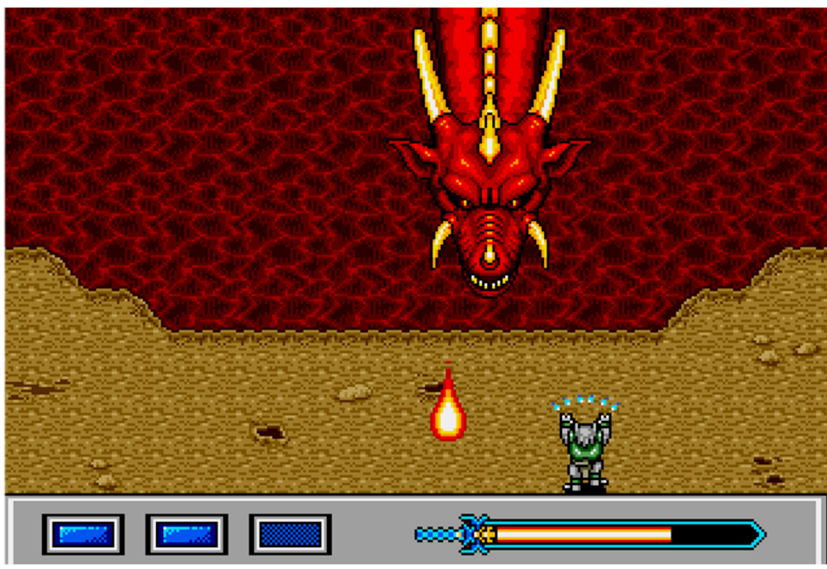
The Quest to Destroy Venum mode was revolutionary for the time in that it was a true RPG/Fighting Game hybrid. You pick a character, get a little bit of character specific story, then set off to get strong enough to face off with Venum. You begin this mode in a quaint little town filled with shops and other places of interest. At the start your character is incredibly weak and will have virtually no chance whatsoever of winning a fight, so before setting out into the world you need to head to the gym and train. Here you can pick and choose how you want to build your character up by selecting the specific workouts they engage in. Not only does this cost gold but it also takes away your HP, meaning that you have to be careful not to overdo it since not having enough HP to complete a training day means you don't get any benefit. You can also boost your stats by buying various potions, swords and armor, although at the start these are going to be way out of your price range.



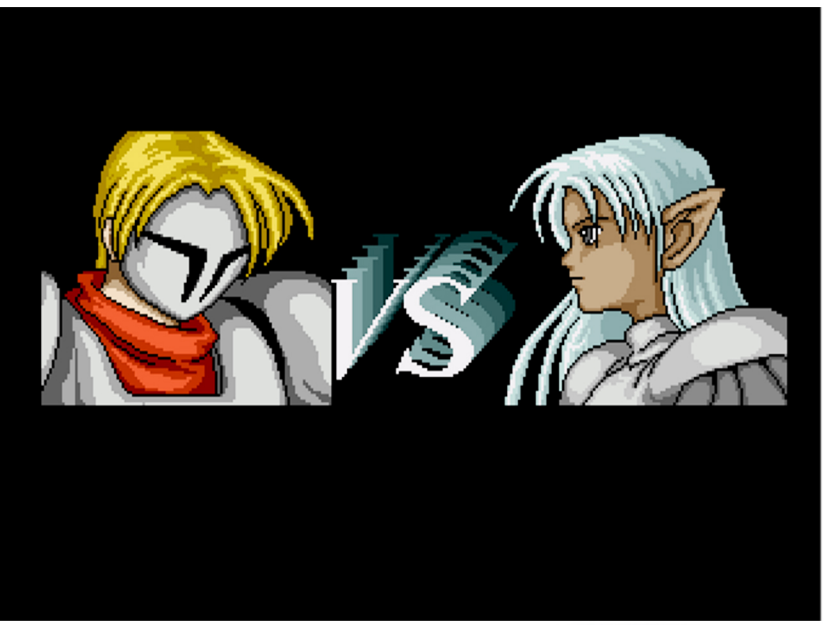
After you've beefed yourself up a bit it's time to go pick a fight. Even though you've hit the weights chances are you will more than likely end up face down in the dirt no matter which enemy you face off against. All is not lost however as you gain experience and gold which can be used to train your character. It will take a little bit of grinding before you will be strong enough to compete in these fights.

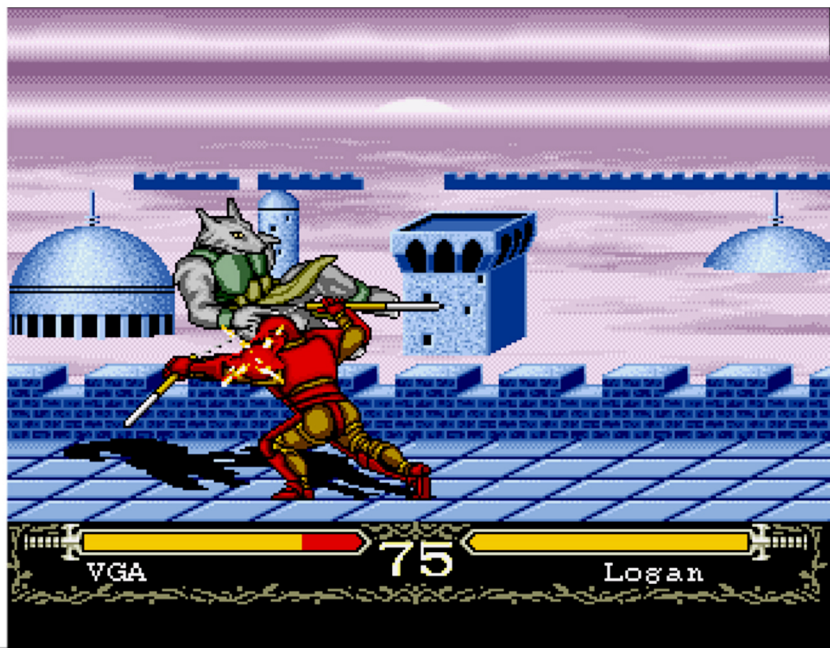
Now if you are tired of having your rear end kicked up and down the battle arena, there is another way to earn cash. All you have to do is visit the guild that is beside the gym and take on special missions to help rid the world of evil. Upon accepting the mission you are transported to a surprisingly good Shmup. Sure the levels are short, but the action is frantic and it's a great way to build up your training budget.

The game doesn't go on forever though as you only have a year (365 days) to get strong enough to defeat Venum. The time flies by as every time you train or fight or take a guild mission is a day. If you are able to defeat your nemesis you will get one of ten unique animated endings.



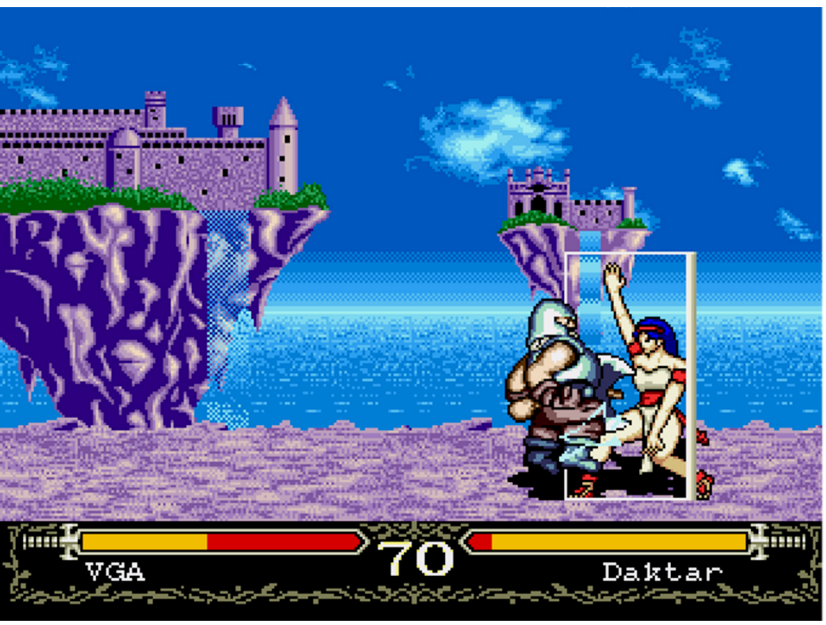
Now as you might have noticed I've spent the entire article talking about everything but the actual fighting. Well I'm sad to say that even though the modes are unique the actual fighting is about as bad as it gets. It's like the designers spent all of their time on the bonus modes and forgot to work on the fighting. It's slow, choppy, and even on Easy Mode the AI is about as evil as it gets. You know things are bad when your computer opponent can block your attack while grabbing you and throwing you halfway across the screen before you even have a chance to react. On top of that the collision detection is atrocious. Half the time your attack will go right through your opponent without leaving a mark, yet they seem to be able to hit you at will. Toss in the fact that the computer will constantly throw out combos that leaves you on the verge of death and you have a fighting game that is pretty much unplayable.

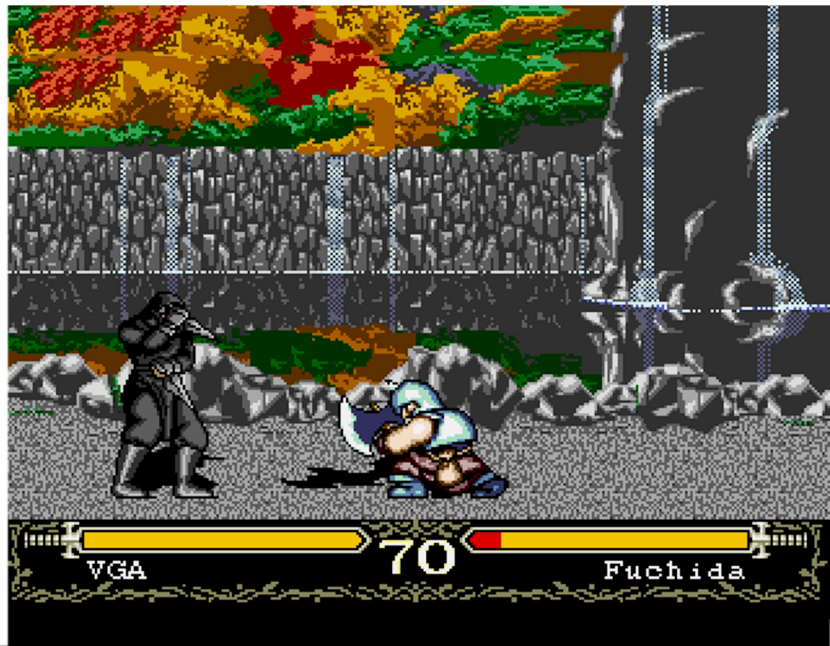




The final thing worth mentioning is the Anime influenced animation that is sprinkled throughout the game. There is a lengthy opening as well as custom opens and endings for each of the ten characters, all of which include epic music and voice over. Granted the voice acting is typical early 90's Sega CD quality (it falls somewhere between Sewer Shark and Night Trap) and the animation looks like Anime if it were designed with an early version of MS Paint, but there is still a certain amount of nostalgic campiness to it that makes it kind of endearing.

As an overall package, Revengers of Vengeance falls short. That said you should definitely check it out if for no other reason that to see how with a little more refinement to the fighting engine this could have been a groundbreaking title instead of a title that only makes you stop and say "Wow, they named a game Revengers of Vengeance? That's pretty cool".





System: Super Nintendo
Released: 1995
Players: 1
Publisher: Seta

If you ever wondered what would happen if the original Prince of Persia was reincarnated as a vampire fighting kung fu master in a track suit, then Nosferatu is the answer to your inquiry.

You've heard the story a thousand times before, something evil has kidnapped your girlfriend and it's up to you and you alone to fight through untold numbers of evil things to save her. In this case the evil of choice ranges from vampires to zombies to floating eyeballs, which is a nice change of pace from the standard gang of thugs who look like rejected extras from The Warriors. And frankly it's always good to see Frankenstein and giant mummies getting work outside of the Castlevania franchise.

While the wide assortment of monsters is fun to see, the hero of the game is going to leave you shaking your head. Usually in this type of setting you are going to get a Simon Belmont type of character, complete with leather armor, whips and a wide variety of blades to help him on his quest. Of course Nosferatu isn't the typical game, so instead of a legendary hero we get Kyle, who is dressed in a spiffy blue track suit and apparently took a few kung fu classes back in high school. He looks less like a hero and more like he's warming up to do a tumbling routine during a pep rally.

Even though our hero Kyle isn't overly impressive...or moderately impressive...or...well...remotely interesting in the least, his decision to take on the evils of the night with nothing but his bare hands does lead to some really cool moments. Take the first boss encounter, which is with a werewolf nearly twice his size. Fighting a werewolf with a whip or a sword is cool, but getting into a fist fight with one is even cooler. At least it would be cool if it wasn't for the fact the control scheme is downright horrible.

The game controls just like the original Prince of Persia games, complete with the annoying feature of having to perfectly time your button presses about three seconds before you actually want your hero to do anything. This wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the fact there are some difficult platforming sections that require precise timing in order to avoid falling face first into a bed of pulsating spikes. Also problematic is that there are only two buttons, a jump and an attack button, which means in order to pull off any of the wide variety of moves the button presses must be combined with a perfectly timed direction input. This get particularly frustrating when you have four steps to do a double tap to the right to make Kyle run, which must be followed up with the attack button being pressed at the same time you are pressing down in order to slide underneath an obstacle. More often than not this results in you running face first into a wall.

(Side Note: The decision on the part of the designers to only have two buttons is truly mind boggling. Kyle is supposed to be a kung fu master that can unleash a devastating range of attacks, yet thanks to the nearly impossible input scheme the most you can really hope for is a flurry of punches and occasionally a shoulder lunge. The Super Nintendo controller has six buttons on it, so would it have really been that hard to map on a "run" and a "slide" button? Heck they had room to have a "run", "slide", "punch", "kick", and "jump" button and still have room left for a "pep rally tumble" button. Actually that would have been pretty cool. Just imagine after winning a fist fight with a werewolf if you could make the track suit wearing hero do a cartwheel in celebration.)

While the controls are bad there are actually worse things about the game, most notably the bevy of cheap hits that will drain your meager amount of health. It's one thing to mistime a punch which results in you getting hit by an enemy, it's another thing entirely for something to pop up out of the ground or drop down from the ceiling without any warning whatsoever and hit you. This is doubly infuriating because whenever you hit a hallway where this happens you don't just get hit once, you get hit enough times to cut your health in half. Sadly these hallways are all too frequent, and no matter how good your reflexes are you are going to get hit. The only possible way to avoid this is to play the game repeatedly and memorize where they come up. I suppose this is a way to extend the replay value of this short 6 level game, but it's a mighty cheap way of doing it.

The only other thing worth mentioning is the inclusion of a powerup system. As you kill enemies or loot treasure chests you can find crystals that will boost your combo attacks. At the start the only combo you have is a trio of jabs, but as you get more crystals you can add in power punches and body kicks into the mix. This would be a great idea if you didn't lose a crystal every time you got knocked down. Not just knocked down, but stunned in any way whatsoever. Like if you miss a button press and face plant against the wall you are trying to slide under or if you misjudge a ledge and fall off instead of climbing down. Since the crystals are kind of hard to come by only the most careful of players are going to ever have enough to enjoy some of the more vicious combos.

Even though I have been kind of harsh on the controls and the cheapness of some of the enemies, Nosferatu is still a borderline solid title. There is enough decent stuff here to make the fans of the early Prince of Persia games happy. Plus it's one of the few times in life you'll ever get to have a fist fight with a werewolf or Frankenstein, so it's worth playing just for that experience (don't worry, it comes really early in the game). That said, with a better control scheme and fighting system this could have been one of the most satisfying 16-Bit games ever. As it stands though it's a monument to what could have been.

System: Super Nintendo
Released: 1993
Players: 1
Publisher: Taito

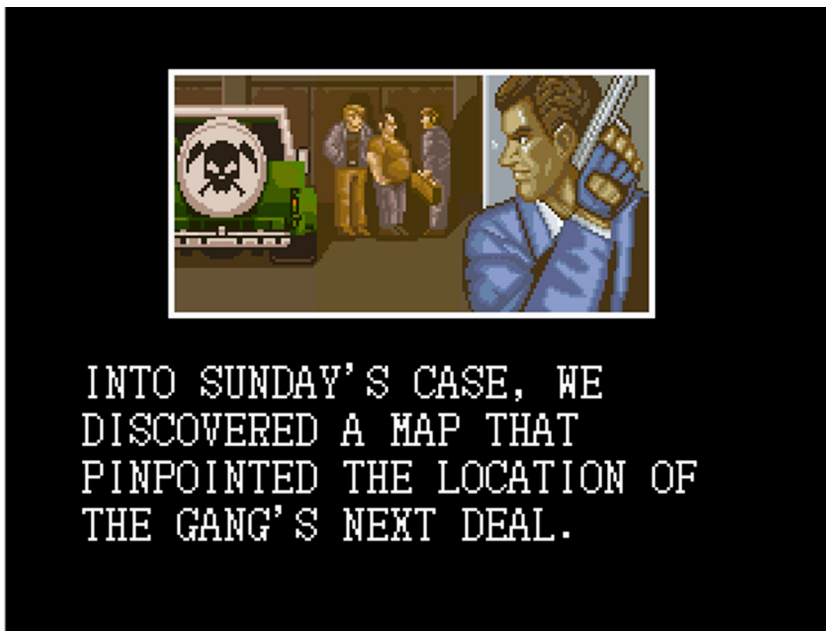
Super Chase HQ is part racing game and part rear ending simulator. And yes, I am well aware that sounds dirty...

This is one of those games that sounds great on paper. You are a cop in a supped up police car that has to race against time to catch up to and apprehend violent gang members who are trying to escape from their latest crime. See, that sounds pretty awesome doesn't it? Yeah, get ready for disappointment.

The levels are broken up into two segments, the chase and the apprehension. When the level begins you'll get a message from dispatch describing the car you are looking for. From there you race across the city to catch up to them. This segment is little more than weaving in and out of traffic. No, wait, it's actually more like a Sunday drive since there aren't that many cars out on the road, and the vehicles that are on the road you are virtually impervious to. For example, if you hit a car head on all you do is fly in the air like you are driving the General Lee and just hit a wicked dirt jump while being pursued by Boss Hog (What? I grew up in the South in the 80's and have an appreciation for the Dukes of Hazzard). Anyway, this doesn't really slow you down that much, just takes a little bit of health away from your car. In fact you can spend half your trip doing jumps off of oncoming traffic and still make it to the end with time to spare. Now you can do this because your car cruises at 180 MPH and can hit nearly 250 MPH with the speed boosts.

(Side Note: Given that you have to average over 200 MPH in order to catch up with the getaway car, why in the world are they calling you in for this job? I mean I know major cities are having to make draconian budget cuts to shore up budgets, but did they really have to fire all the cops except for you?)

Now every now and then while driving you'll be greeted with various motorcycle gangs that like to slow you down. Some shoot at you, some just get in your way, while others resort to recruiting shirtless mowhawked molotov cocktail throwing clones. Regardless of the variety of motorcycle gang it is virtually impossible to avoid their attacks since no matter how fast you are going they are able to match your speed. Even though it's a bit annoying, the game makes up for it by giving you the satisfaction of finally running them over and see them slide up your windshield before becoming roadkill.



Once you've survived the chase portion of the stage it's time for the read ender simulator..err...I mean the confrontation. All you do is hit the gas and ride their bumper until the game decides to let you clip them. Occasionally you can score a hit if you swerve back and forth, but for the most part all you do is tailgate until you hit their bumper. This goes on for quite a while until your car is dented up pretty good and their car is on fire. It is never explained why exactly hitting their back bumper eventually causes their car to burst into flames, unless of course they are all driving supped up Ford Pintos (if you are too young to get the reference just google it).

(Side Note: Your hood is usually folded up like an accordion by the end of every level, yet just a few game days later it's not only straightened out but without a single scratch. Now given that your car can hit 250MPH, chances are you aren't replacing the car every few days. On the one hand it's kind of perplexing that the city has had to slash the police budget down to just you yet they have the money to constantly repair your very expensive car. On the other hand can somebody find out the name of that body shop?).

The only other thing worth mentioning is gameplay screen. Between your dash and the odometer a full 75% of the screen is covered up with worthless stuff, meaning that your view of the road isn't the greatest. As a result, when you are launching off of the family sedans that are suddenly greeted with your presence in their lane all you can see is sky. Actually when you are going uphill all you can see is sky. This is not only annoying but it takes away a lot from the game as it greatly reduces your ability to navigate the roads.

On the other hand however it does allow for one of the funnier things I've seen in a video game. When you are driving along pay attention to your characters eyes in the rear view mirror. When he's driving he has the confident stare of a man who wrestles bears in the Alaskan wilderness as a warm up to his main act of fighting off a pack of lions while wearing a suit of raw gazelle meat and armed only with a butter knife (seriously, it's a very confident look). That said, as soon as he rear ends the getaway car that confident look is replaced with one that mirrors that of a 15 year old in a beat up sedan being forced by his sadistic driving school instructor to merge onto the L.A. Freeway during rush hour. Now it's one thing to have that look if you are flying through the air like the Duke boys or having a molotov cocktail land on your hood, but to have that look as you hit the rear bumper of another car doesn't exactly give credibility to the notion that you were good enough that the city could lay off the rest of the police force.

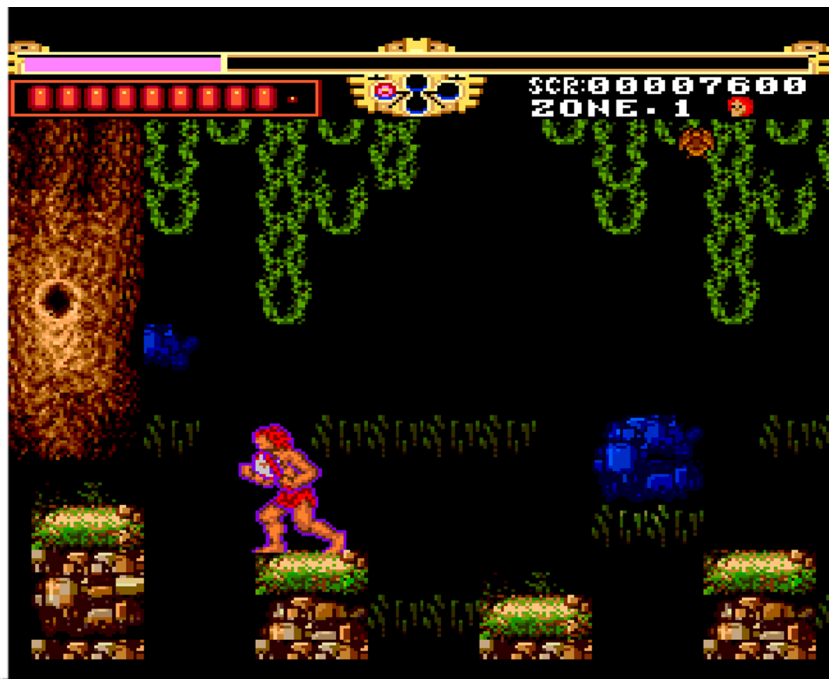
If you like driving games and want to set a few cars on fire while driving down the interstate, this game is worth a look. If you like driving games and want to play a fun one, check elsewhere.

System: TurboGrafx - 16
Released: 1989
Players: 1
Publisher: Victor Interactive Software

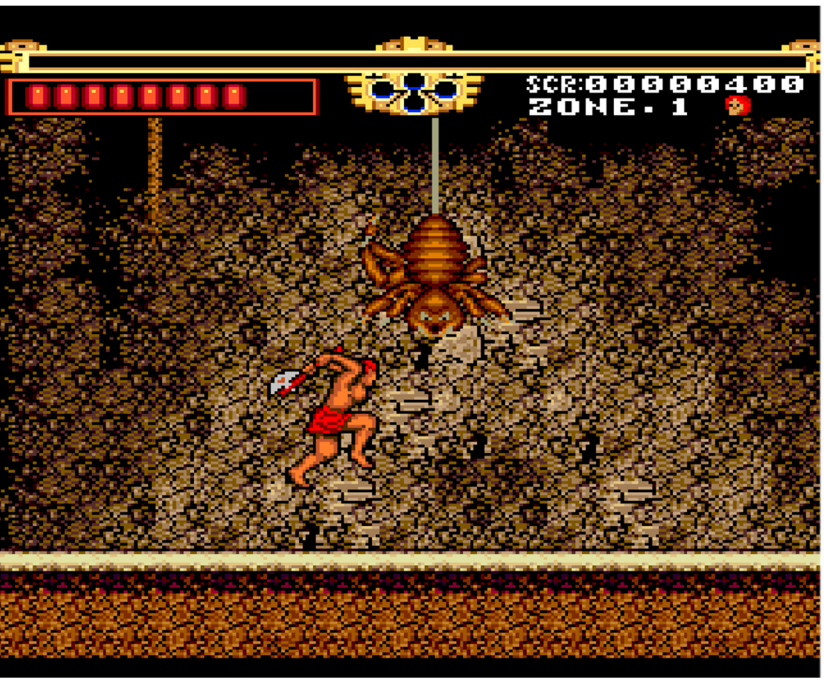
THE LEGENDARY AXE

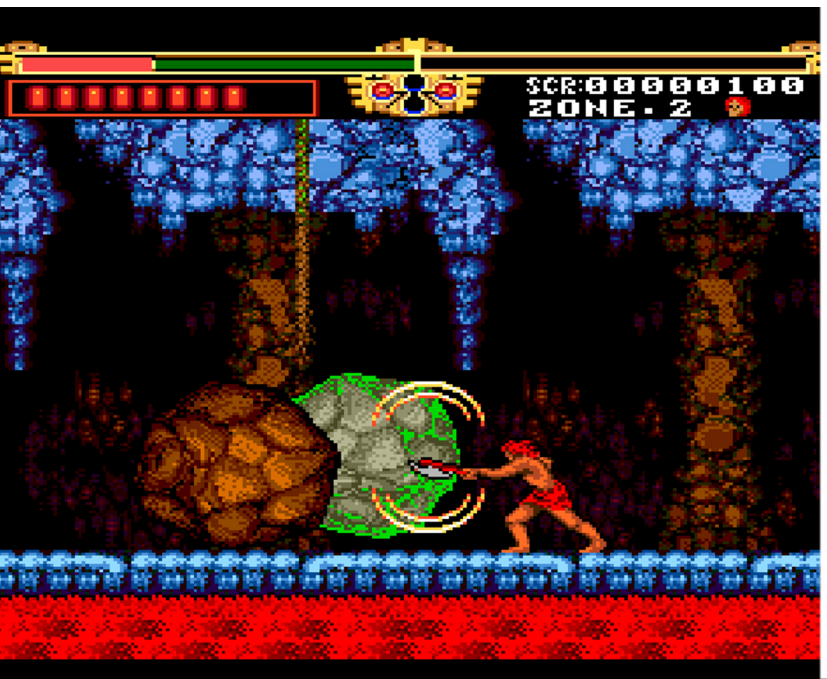
Legendary Axe puts you in control of an axe wielding caveman that must hack his way through numerous prehistoric creatures in order to save a friend from becoming a human sacrifice. Sadly the game isn't anywhere near as cool as the concept.

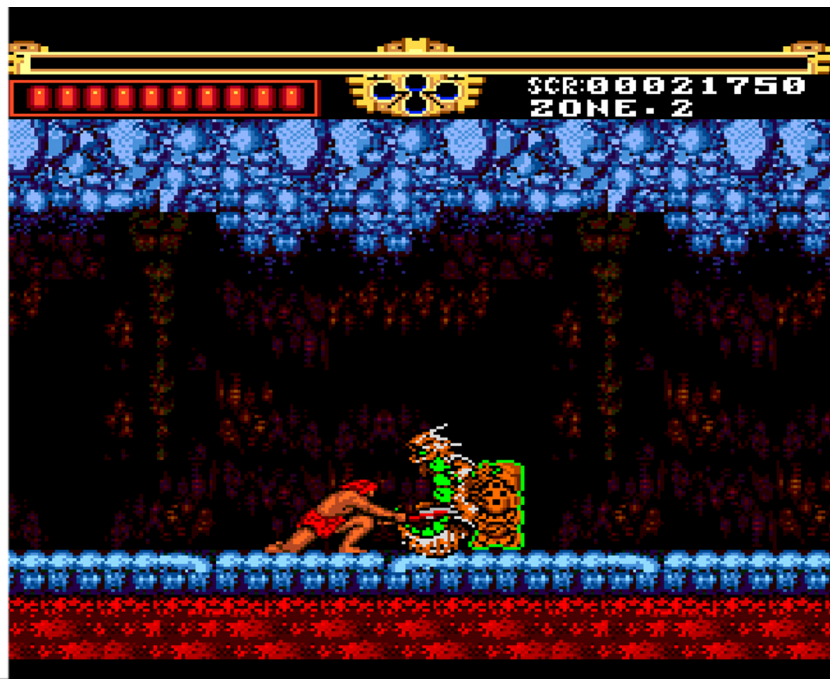
The first thing you are going to notice is that your loin cloth wearing caveman has a major size problem when it comes to his axe. With the title "Legendary Axe" you would expect the hero to be wielding an enchanted axe that was the size of a midget. Instead our caveman is wielding more of a "Legendary Hatchet", which makes him look more like Lizzie Borden rather than a legendary hero. Size issues aside, he does know how to do some damage with his axe, which is a good thing since the enemies are plentiful, not to mention bizarre.



OK, to be fair the common enemies are pretty standard for a game like this. You have your axe wielding orcs, as well as a wide variety of flying creatures (Birds, bats, butterflies. Yes, butterflies). Some of your enemies do start approaching the bizarre threshold, like the giant rock creature or the giant web spewing spider, but nothing compares to the oddity that are the bosses. Take the first two for example. After fighting through vampire bats and axe wielding orcs you face off against two giant bears (if only we had listened to Stephen Colbert). Now I know you are probably thinking that fighting two giant bears that are constantly jumping isn't that bizarre, and on it's own you are correct, but when you combine it with the fact that the second boss is a giant radioactive boulder that rolls back and forth, then you have to start wondering what the designers were thinking.







The strangeness of the enemies really isn't that big of an issue, however there are plenty of problems to be found here. The biggest is that the controls leave a lot to be desired. Sure it's easy to walk up to something and hatchet it to death, but god forbid you try and jump over anything. Jumping is very difficult, so of course they make sure that you have tons of bottomless pits to leap over. If that weren't bad enough, whenever you get hit you get thrown back with such force that you'd swear your caveman was a part of the Jackie Chan wire stunt team. He will fly back about half the screen, which is a big deal since more often than not he'll end up flying right back into a bottomless pit. Add that in with the fact that you only have 3 continues and the overwhelming majority of players will never see the ending unless they get really familiar with the "save state" feature on an emulator.

There are some good things about the game however, most notably the nifty powerup system. When you first start out most enemies will take multiple hits with your hatchet in order to kill. As you progress however you'll come across powerups that will allow you to automatically charge your strikes giving you more power. The more of these you find, the stronger your attacks will be, however the downside to this is that when you die you lose a power level. When you are fully charged you start glowing like you are some sort of prehistoric raver kid, which lets you know that your next swing will be all-powerful. This is satisfying as you can easily hack a few orcs to death, not to mention exact revenge on those birds (Sorry, Ninja Gaiden scarred me for life when it comes to birds in video games. I still have nightmares about some of those encounters.).

This is really one of those video game oddities that doesn't make much sense to me. Virtually every review of this game elevates this to, well, legendary status. Actually now that I think about it every time I ever hear someone talk about Legendary Axe it is talked about like it is one of the all time greats. While the game is decent enough to warrant a try from Action game fans, I honestly have no idea where all of this praise comes from. The only thing I can come up with is that it is a combination of a small Turbo-Grafx library and nostalgia.

System: TurboGrafx - 16
Released: 1990
Players: 1
Publisher: Irem

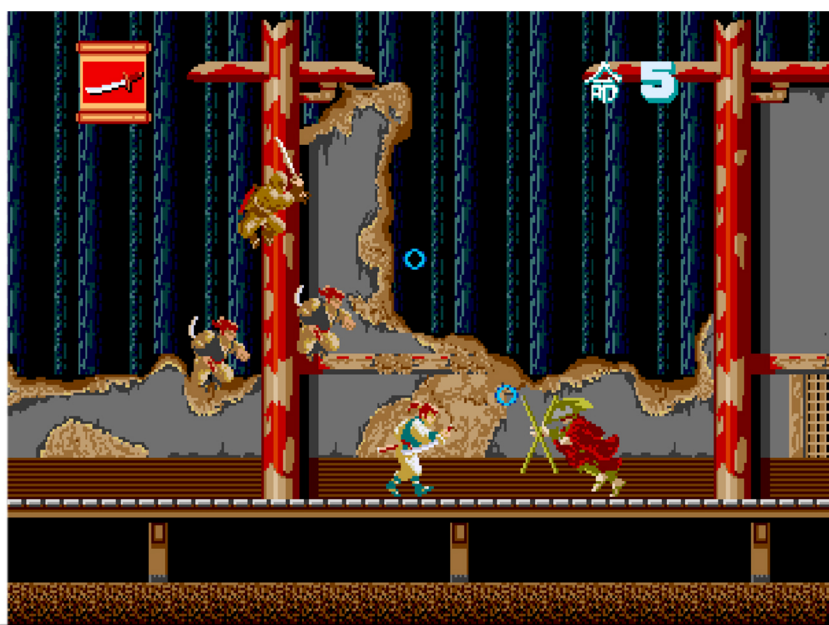
This game is chocked full of Ninjas and Ninja related activities that will please any video game geek. Just don't expect it to last too long.

Ninja Spirit puts you in control of a heavily armed ninja on a quest to kill everything in existence. Well, maybe not everything in existence but at least everything that crosses his path. The gameplay is the standard late 80's/early 90's side scrolling arcade action, but it is done very well here. The controls are responsive, making it easy to make your ninja dodge oncoming fire while returning the favor with attacks of your own. The action is fast and furious, there is always something on screen for you to kill, and wow, just wait till you see the weapons.

Your ninja has a full arsenal of weaponry at his disposal. Of course he has the typical ninja sword, but there is also a grappling hook you can swing around you, shurikens that let you strike from a distance, and there is something called the Bamboo Thunder Bomb, which is pretty much a killer name for a grenade (and also sounds like the finishing move of an X-rated manga character, but let's not dwell on that). You can switch between the weapons at will which allows you to pick and choose the type of ninja you want to be. You want to be a ranged assassin? Done. You like the feeling you get by killing your enemies up close and personal? Done. You like acting like a mad bomber? Done as well.

Now it's fun to slice and dice your way through hundreds of enemies, however it's even more fun when you have some backup. No, there's no two player option, but there are powerups that makes clones of your high flying ninja that copies every move he makes. Once you have found two of these it's quite easy to turn the battlefield into a ninja fueled bloodbath.

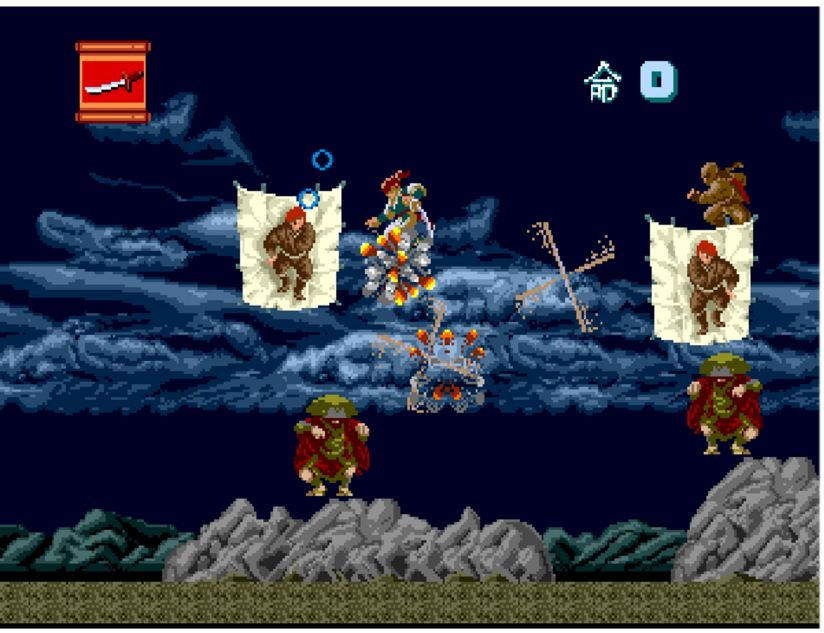
Each of the seven levels are pretty straightforward. For the bulk of them you go from left to right until you reach the boss, but every now and then you get to climb upwards through the level. This adds a little to the variety, but not much. Regardless of the direction you are traveling you'll find that the levels are quite short. Did I say short? I meant blink and you'll miss them short. More often than not, by the time you get used to what the level has to offer you are at the boss.

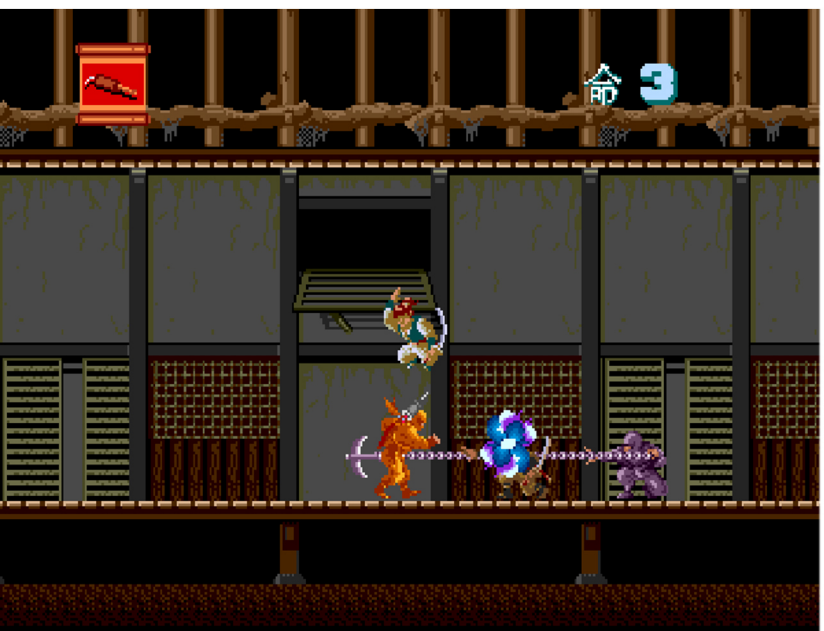


Thankfully the levels are filled to capacity with a wide variety of enemies to butcher. Yeah you have your standard ninjas and gunmen, but you also have giant deformed samurais, and ninjas on giant kites flying in from above. There is also a famous cameo from the right hand man of the bad guy from Big Trouble in Little China (sadly he doesn't act like an overinflated balloon when defeated) These enemies come out of the woodwork in a never ending stream, so while the levels are short they are action packed.

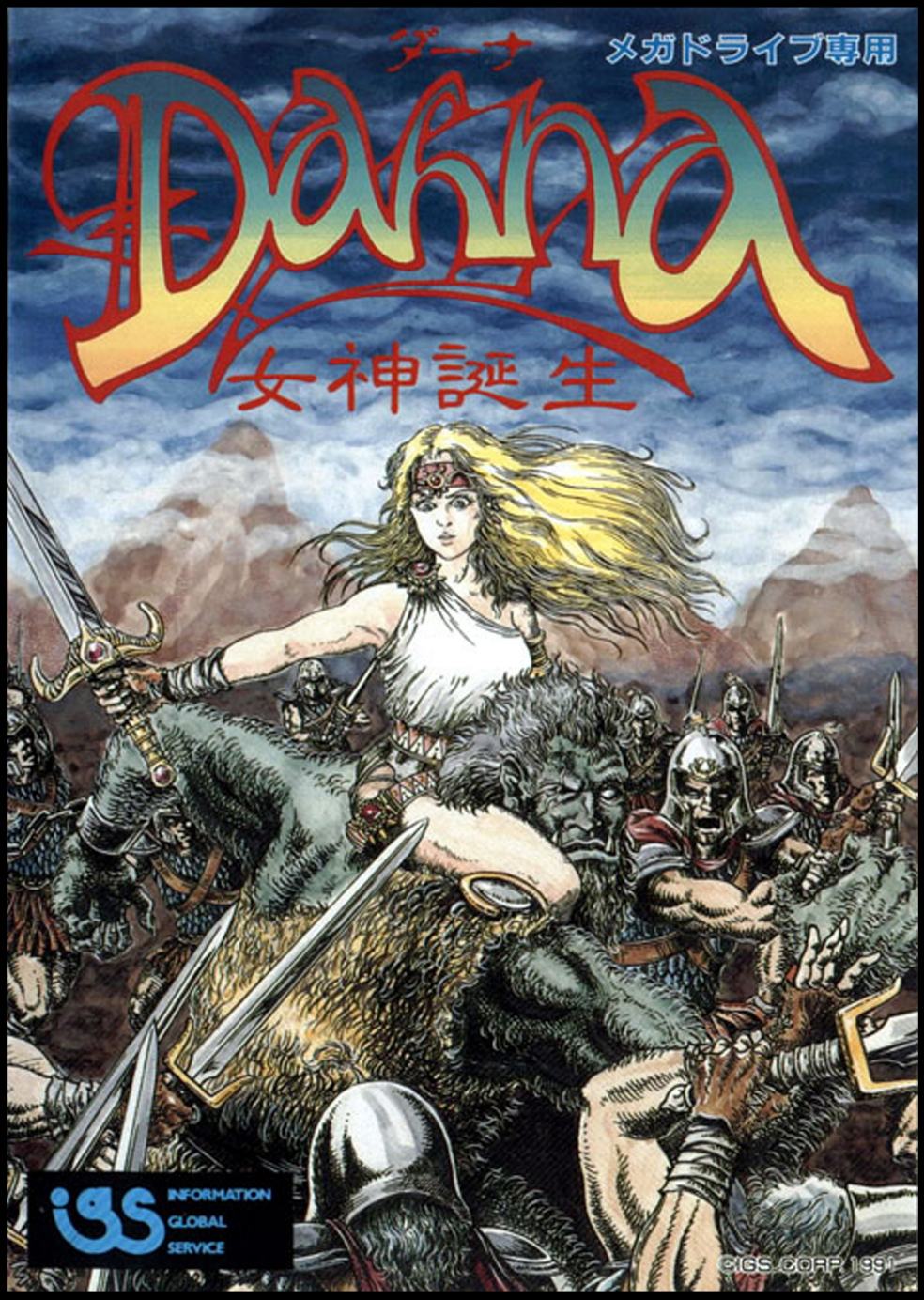
The boss battles are fairly epic encounters with enemies that fill the screen. Well, they are epic if you haven't found your two ghost buddies during the level. Without your allies you will spend the fight leaping around throwing every ninja weapon you have at them while dodging attack after attack in a thrilling duel to the death. With your ghost buddies however you can stay safely away and let your invulnerable friends defeat the boss. Take the first level boss for example, he is a giant demon that stands in the middle of the screen and attacks you. If you have your friends all you have to do is jump straight up while standing beside the boss. Assuming you don't move from that spot your allies will be frozen beside the bosses weak point, and a few button presses later you will emerge victorious without breaking a sweat. Even when you face off against future bosses, like the second level claw wielding ninja that leaps from tree to tree, you can use your ghost clones to kill the boss while keeping your distance. It's kind of cheap, but it's nice to know that it's there if you are having problems with a boss.

This brings me to the biggest issue with Ninja Spirit, it's length. This game consists of only seven short levels, which means that once a player got the hang of it they could run through the entire game in a matter of minutes. Now if Ninja Spirit had been released during the early days of the 8-Bit systems or if additional gameplay modes had been included this might have been acceptable, but as it stands it is a bit of a disappointment especially when compared to another ninja classic Revenge of Shinobi. I realize the comparisons aren't perfect, but they are both ninja based side scrolling action console games, and they were released within a year of each other (Shinobi coming out earlier). Revenge of Shinobi contains 16 lengthy levels as well as 8 stand alone boss battles, which means that the average gamer is going to need to spend an hour or two playing through even after they get a handle of the game, which is a far cry from Ninja Spirit which can be completed during someone's coffee break.





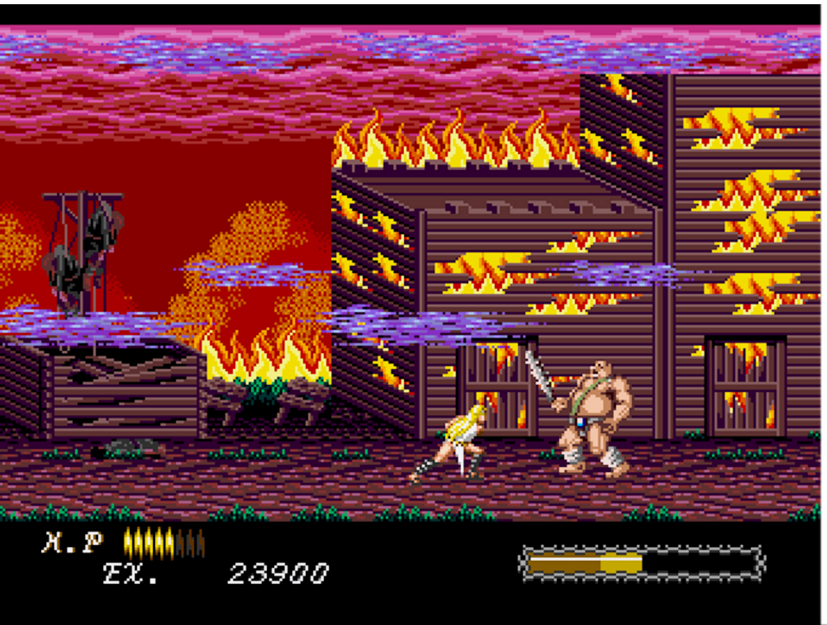
You know, I'd like to clarify the previous paragraph. The length issue is coming from the perspective of buying the game new compared to buying the game now. Back in the day the vast majority of us had a limited video game budget, and since I remember that vividly I view incredibly short games like this as a negative. Nothing made me angrier growing up than saving for weeks and weeks to buy a new game only to get stuck with something I could finish before bedtime. When viewed through the prism of today however Ninja Spirit is a pristine example of an arcade style action game that deserves to be played.



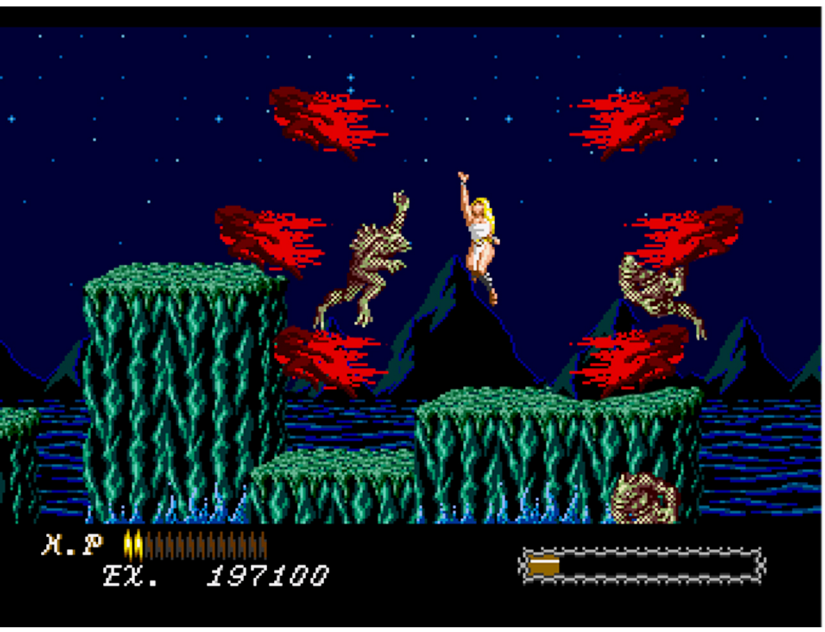
System: Sega Mega Drive
Released: 1991
Players: 1
Publisher: IGS

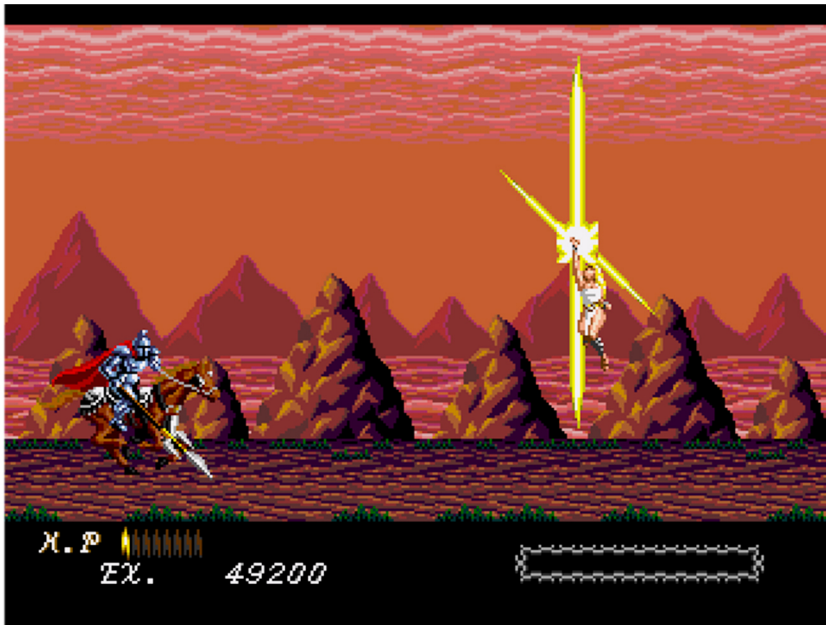
Dahna for the Sega Mega Drive gives you control of a sword wielding peasant girl (who also dabbles in magic) as she rampages across the countryside in search of some old guy that was kidnapped by an evil sorcerer. Oh, and given that the first level appears to be set in her village as it's set ablaze by the same evil sorcerer I'm going to go out on a limb and assume that she's out for revenge as well.

The gameplay is your standard hack and slash platforming action, but at least at the start of the first level there is something totally unexpected and downright fun. Right after the evil sorcerer kidnaps the old man, the heroine rides into town on the back of a giant ogre that is twice as tall as the enemies who are feebly trying to take it on. Sure you can punch them so hard they liquify, but if you want to have some real fun just try jumping on their heads and making them go squish. Sadly this is very short lived as the evil sorcerer appears and vaporizes the ogre once he realizes his men are no match for your giant green friend. From there you gain full control of the peasant girl, and despite lacking the ability to crush her enemies by jumping on them, she is more than capable of using her sword to carve them a new one.



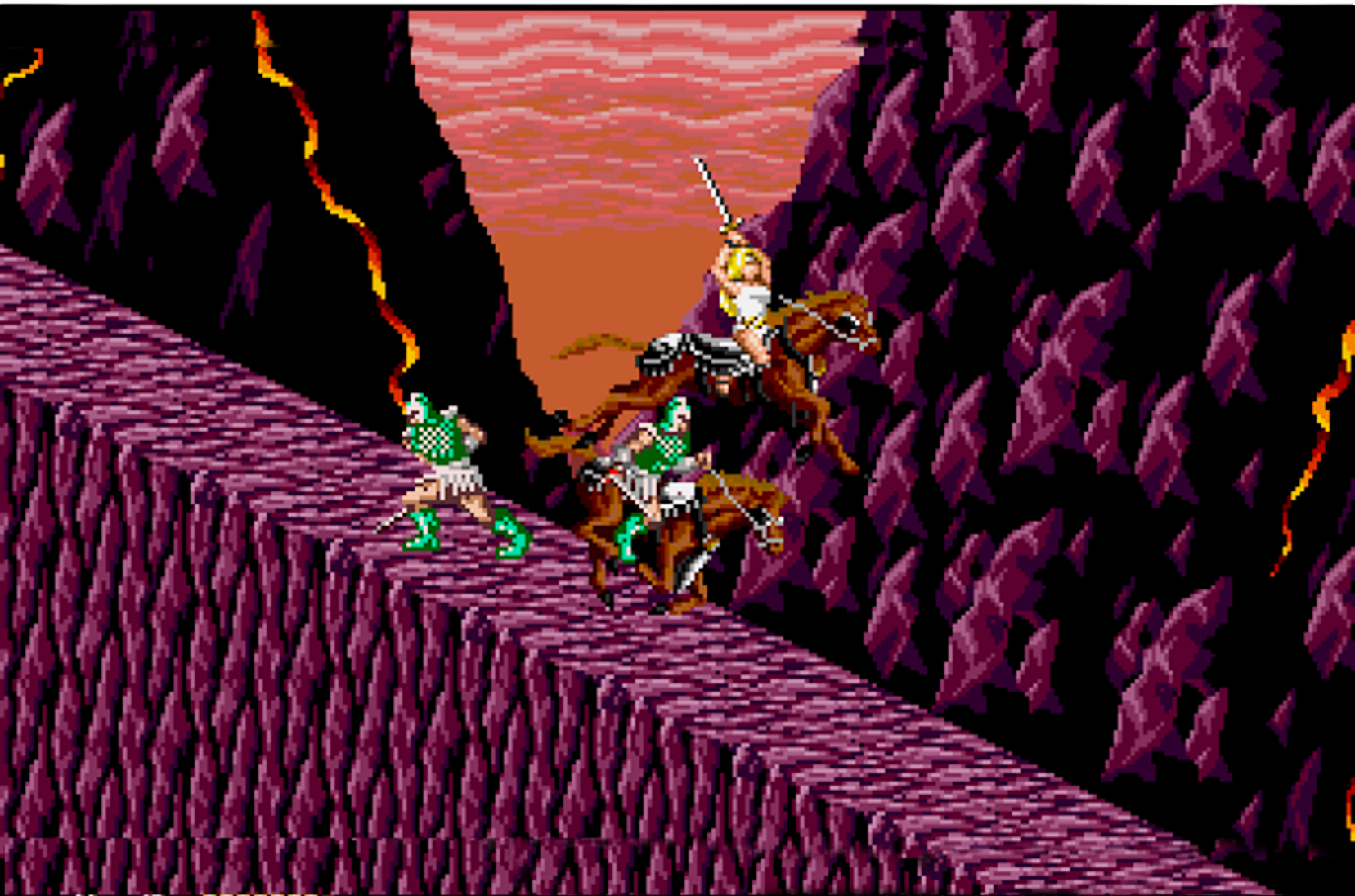
The levels are broken up into multiple parts, which is nice since it provides a checkpoint for you should your heroine perish. The first few levels of Dahna have some very nice set pieces to them. For example in the first level you have to make your way to the top of a tall house that is covered in flames. As you fight your way up you have to dodge fireballs, as well as make quick jumps off fire engulfed ledges before they plummet to the floor below. The scene culminates in a two-on-one battle with a couple of what looks like Roman Centurions. The third level has you on a sea swept coastline leaping from rock to rock before taking on a small army of sea creatures that leap from the waters below. The most memorable scene from early in the game however is the second level mountain descent.





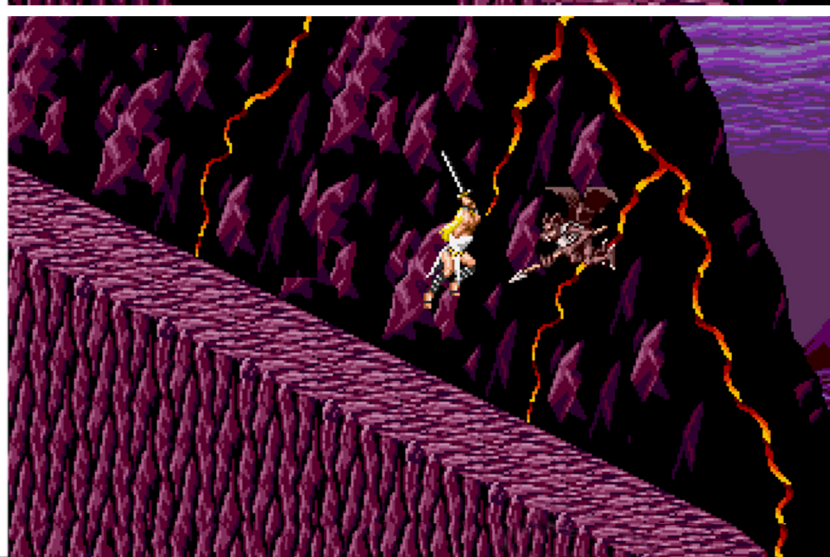
You start out on horseback and you ride down the side of a mountain as you cut the enemies standing in your way in half while dodging oncoming boulders and charging enemies mounted on horses. After reaching the first plateau your horse has decided it's had enough so you are left to run down the rest of the mountain on your own. What follows is an incredible downhill foot race filled with treacherous jumps and evil winged monkey men who are determined to knock you off your path and into the chasm below. The entire segment is fast paced, not to mention a bit tense since some of those jumps require you to have a full head of steam in order to just barely make the jump.

(Side Note: Apparently your village was at the top of a mountain. A very, very, very tall mountain. Seriously, this had to have been the tallest mountain in the world. How tall is it? Well if you could somehow sled down it I'm pretty sure that you would break the sound barrier before reaching the bottom. Of course doing that on a regulation Rosebud style sled would probably result in the skin peeling from your body, but man what a ride).

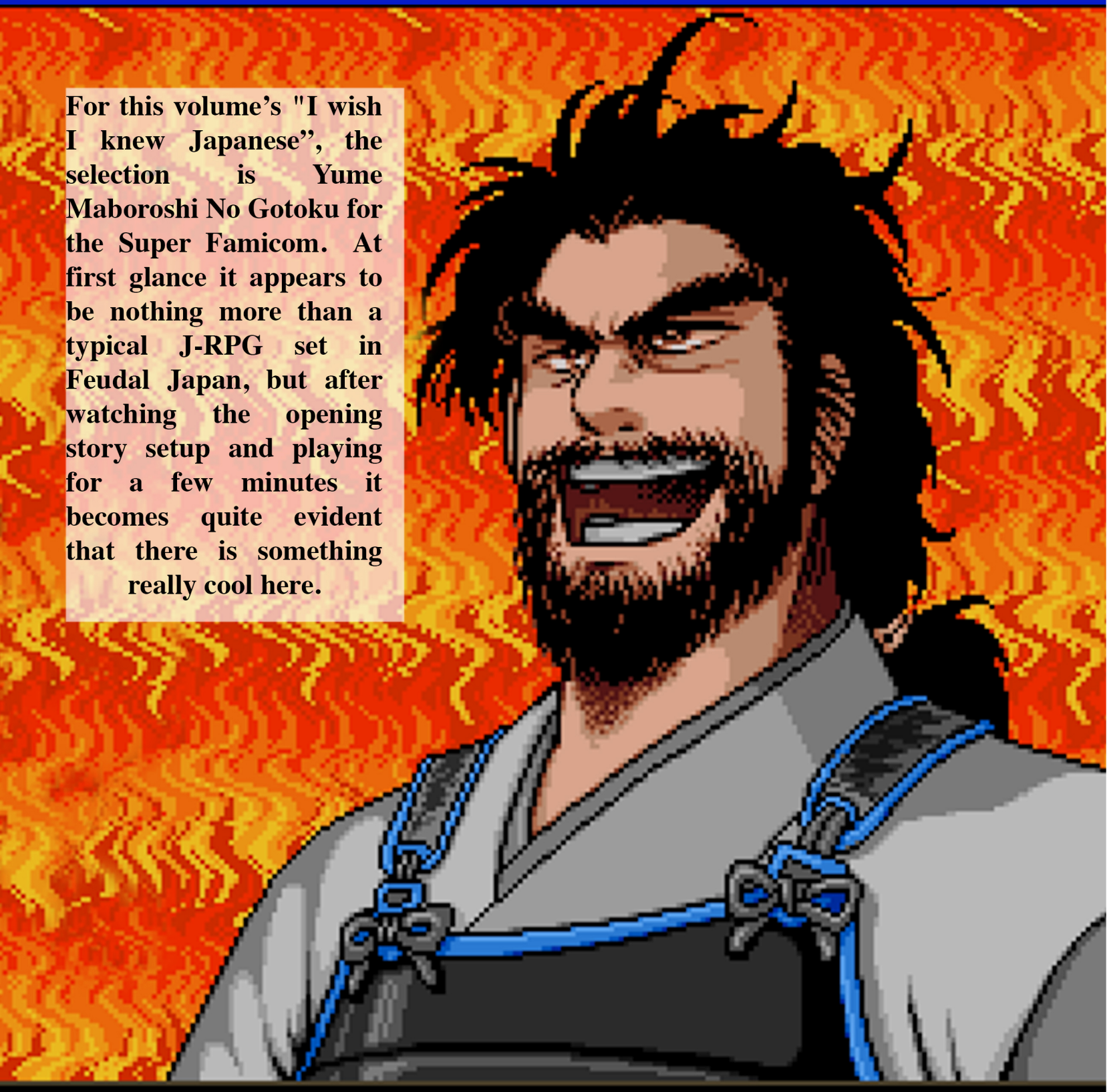


While everything above sounds great, there are a few problems that need to be mentioned. The first is the fact you only have 5 lives to complete the entire game. Sure you have a healthy life bar, but that doesn't help if you mistime a jump and end up doing a header off a mountain. The other problem is the fact that both your attack and your jump buttons are turbo. While this isn't a big deal with your sword, it can be a big problem when you are trying to navigate some tricky platforming sections. There's nothing like making a tough jump only to inadvertently hold down the jump button a split second too long and then do another half jump right into the next bottomless pit.

Minor issues aside this is a very solid action title for the Mega Drive. There is very little text in the game that is unreadable (the options menu is in English), and while you won't get a full grasp of the story it really won't matter that much since it appears to have the same story as 95% of the games in this genre have.



Yume Maboroshi No Gotoku



For this volume's "I wish I knew Japanese", the selection is Yume Maboroshi No Gotoku for the Super Famicom. At first glance it appears to be nothing more than a typical J-RPG set in Feudal Japan, but after watching the opening story setup and playing for a few minutes it becomes quite evident that there is something really cool here.

OK, as best I can tell the story opens with an old samurai who dies after an epic battle (he even has the decency to wait until it starts to rain before passing so that the dramatic impact can really be felt). During his funeral procession the Epic Beard Man from the title screen appears to mock his passing, which gives him a first class trip to the home of an offended leader. After being scolded he is set free only to have what looks like an assassin be sent after him. From there he is set loose upon the world to engage in conversations that you'll have no chance whatsoever to understand, and to occasionally get into random encounters with axe wielding thugs.

The other thing that really makes this game one I wish I could play is the cast of incredibly colorful characters. In the opening few minutes you get to talk with guys with incredible beard/muttonchop combinations, a warrior with one eye, a rat faced guy, and even a guy that looks like Pei Mei from Kill Bill.

Sadly unless you have a decent understanding of Japanese you won't get that far, which is a shame because this looks like old school RPG gold.